Hearth Stories

Issue Three, Winter Solstice 2024

Hearth Stories

Hearth Stories is a digital speculative fiction magazine exploring connection, family, relationships, comfort, and the natural world. For more information, please visit hearthstories.org.

Produced and Edited by Sloum.

A Letter from the Editor

It is autumn as I write this here in the mountains. While we have had some snow, it has been pretty warm for the time of year. The leaves have mostly all fallen now and I find myself looking forward to the first bits of true winter. For now, a cup of herbal tea and a look out the window at the birds in the leafless cherry tree serves as a nice reminder of the passage of the year. I hope all you readers out there have a wonderful autumn and winter and that this issue brings you some warmth in the cool seasons.

This issue has taken shape a little differently than the previous two. When I first started *Hearth Stories* I had planned on publishing short stories *and* poetry. After a reading period accepting poetry I found that I just did not get the kind of poetry I was looking to publish. This issue marks the first poetry publication for the magazine with "The Lady of Shalott" by Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Many people will be familiar with this poem, but I am sure some readers will be encountering it for the first time. It seemed to be a

great fit for this issue in particlar, as it felt like it would sit nicely with some of the stories. I hope you enjoy encountering it again, or for the first time. I am unsure as to whether I will include more public domain poetry in the magazine, but it is on my mind as a possibility. While we are not opening the magazine up to poetry submissions in general: if you are a poet and write rhymed narrative poetry that you would like to submit, please send us an e-mail. We might like to read it and would be happy to work out publication details on a case by case basis.

You may notice another small shift with this issue: a further lean into settings with low/no modern technology. From the beginning I wanted the magazine to feature stories that did not have cars, phones, computers, electricity, etc. You may have seen these features from time to time in the background of some of the stories. I love those stories and just did not want to pass them up! However, as things have moved forward—and the modern world has gotten me down a bit more—I have shifted focus to try and share stories that represent another way of life, another time—largely lost to us now. I am hoping that this magazine can continue to feature complex, though generally positive and hopeful, stories that feature a timeless connection with craft, nature, and kinship.

This reaffirming of the direction of the magazine was prompted by a rereading, after many years, of *The Mists of Avalon* by Marion Zimmer Bradley. I loved falling into that world again after so long away from it. Her story, and the stories it is based upon, are

more violent than we would feature. But it made me think about all of the stories set in between the battles; the long winters spent weaving, the long journeys on foot, the companions sitting by the hearth sharing a plate and a loaf, visits to a seer in some far removed location to see if the crops will grow or if love will be found.

In keeping with the above, this issue features stories of hermits and helpers, fairs and friends, the triumph of good over greed, and lots of magic, connection, and nature. We'll see you for a new issue next summer. Until then, I truly hope you enjoy reading each of these wonderful stories!

—Sloum, Editor

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The Portal Makers of Thistleton Fair

By LM Zaerr

I made a portal out of quarter-sawn cherrywood, the surface rippling gold across the fine lines of the grain. As I planed the wood, bursts of magic tingled in my fingers, and as I glued the boards together, a sunlit pool flashed in my mind. I couldn't wait to show Alviva.

My father swept up the curled shavings. "Carpenters make doors, not portals. We could never sell this, Corendo."

"I'll take it to Thistleton Fair. If I sell it there, I can join the Portal Makers' Guild."

"You've never been out of this village, son. Selling a portal isn't as easy as you think." He didn't stop me though, and my portal was good for business. People came into our shop out of curiosity, and once they were there, they thought of furniture they needed or repairs. The children sat in the sawdust and announced their visions as they watched me set vertical slats into the face of the wood.

"I saw a pear," said a boy whose hat kept falling off.

A girl crawled forward and sniffed the wood. "A tangle up high and down low," she proclaimed.

Alviva drifted into the shop holding hands with her little sister, who'd grown too tall for her dress. I breathed in their scent of beeswax, letting that symbol of Alviva's presence radiate through me. "I hear you're making a portal," she said, hunching up her shoulders.

She didn't sound pleased, but I'd been looking forward to telling her, so I said, "Remember when we made a raft out of old boards and floated down the river."

She sighed. "Yes, I remember."

"We dangled our feet in the water and I said I longed for something but didn't know what. Well, I know now. I'm going to join the Portal Makers' Guild."

"Oh," she said and turned away.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

Before Alviva could answer, her sister touched one of the slats and announced, "I saw a mirror, and in the mirror I was beautiful."

"Of course you're beautiful," said Alviva, holding her close.

Their words helped me focus the magic, so I put aside my worry about Alviva for later. The book on portal making said to work quickly when the magic flowed. To make a portal, I had to channel feelings and impulses from deep within. Until it was finished,

I would see only hazy glimpses of what was inside, a place I could shape but not control.

I set a frame into the wood at head height, and in the frame an ornate pattern of straight pieces of basswood. "Look," said the baker, who was always free in the afternoons. "You can see light and shadows through the lattice." One by one, he lifted the children so they could see in, and the children called to their parents who crowded into our shop until no one could move.

My father shooed them out and turned to me. "I've let you follow your heart, but it's been two weeks. The work needs to be done, too."

"Just one more day and I'll be finished."

I shaped a short piece of cherry into a door handle and sanded it until I couldn't feel the shape, just comfort. I set the handle into the door so it could pivot down and unlatch the magic.

People drifted into the shop silently as I rubbed on varnish until the portal glowed and patterns in the wood shifted as I moved my head as if I could see through the surface. I had to guard it while it dried because the children reached to touch it, and the adults yearned to, though they had learned about sticky varnish and knew the damage they would cause.

By the time the varnish was dry, everyone in the village was there, in the shop or clustered on the road outside. I grasped the handle, and red-gold illumination filled the whorls of my fingertips, the cracks of my knuckles, the lines in my palm.

When I opened the portal, light flowed into the dusky shop. The chandlers stood close to it, their faces lit to brilliance except where splashes of candle wax muted the glow. Alviva wasn't with them. She'd been with me years ago when I finished my first bench, and she'd celebrated every triumph after that. And I'd rejoiced with her over her first dozen tapers, her timing candle with strings that flared every hour. Together we'd rescued the wax and honey from an abandoned beehive high in a maple tree. She should have been there.

I motioned the chandlers in, then all the others, and I entered last of all. I'd seen hints of what the magic had created, but never the whole. I stood in a room with wooden walls and arched beams beneath a high ceiling. An archway opened onto a sunny garden, where the children played tag among columbines and roses, and my friends climbed pear trees by a shallow pool. The branches of the trees intertwined into a lattice over the pool, and the pool reflected the branches like a rich carpet until one of my friends shook loose a pear and the ripples swelled into new patterns.

The parquet floor where I stood matched the pool in the garden, a dozen different woods tangled into intricate patterns of branches, with burls shaded like pears. By instinct, I gravitated to the center of the room, to a mahogany table, the woodgrain swirling so it seemed in motion. On that eternal current stood a vase of wooden roses, and the scent of beeswax drifted around me. I had shaped this table and these flowers for Alviva without knowing what would

emerge. I yearned for Alviva to admire the paper-thin rose petals. I reached for her approval like the children reaching for sticky varnish. But she wasn't there.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I had to find her. I went back through the portal and rushed down the main street to the chandlery. She wasn't there, or in their cottage next door. I ran onto the village green, and at last I saw her at the edge of the woods where we often met. I raced around the pool, then uphill to the place where wild roses formed an alcove. Bees hummed through the dizzying scent, louder than my panting. "What's wrong?" I asked. "Don't you like the portal? You haven't seen inside it."

"Corendo, why did you make that thing?"

"I want to be more than a carpenter."

She reached toward me, almost touched my arm. "A portal maker?"

"Yes. Don't you ever want to be more than a chandler, Alviva?"

She wove a blade of grass between her fingers, over and under and then back, until she had green rings on all four fingers. "There's a Babylon Candlemakers' Guild at Thistleton Fair," she said at last. "They make candles that carry people far away. If you light one made with a pinch of lavender, it will take you instantly to a field in France. Dew collected from spider silk makes a candle spit when it burns, and those candles will take you to Faerie."

"You can become a Babylon candlemaker," I exclaimed, overjoyed. "Let's go to Thistleton Fair

together and spend our lives among people immersed in magic."

Alviva pulled the grass free from her fingers and let it float to the ground. "No," she said. "I'd have to change who I am to join the guild. And I'd be making candles for rich people, a luxury they don't even need. Why do people want to go to other places anyway? Here is just fine."

"Well, when you say it that way, it does sound pointless." I took her hand in mine and gazed at the glowing skin flecked with wax. "But everyone in the village loved my portal."

"They love it because you made it, out of what's inside you, and you're going to take it away and give it to strangers."

"That's how I'll get my start," I said. "No one in the village could buy it."

Alviva yanked her hand away. "Go back to your portal and leave me alone. I don't want you here."

We'd had our arguments, but we'd always known what they were about. Now she was angry, and she wouldn't explain. I trudged back to our shop and stood miserably by the vase of wooden roses until at last everyone went home, parents carrying sleeping children sticky with pear juice.

The next morning, I wrapped the portal in linen, then wool, and borrowed a donkey cart from a farmer and set out. Thistleton Fair was a vast field of trampled grass where craftsmen and merchants had set up booths as far as I could see. I found an open spot and unloaded my portal. The scent of mushroom stew from my neighbor's fire made my

mouth water. I put my forehead on my knees and wished I hadn't come. In that moment, I would have welcomed even the village blacksmith, who talked endlessly. And I'd have given anything for a comfortable chat with Alviva, sitting together in the wild-rose alcove.

"Are you hungry?" someone asked. I raised my head, and my neighbor motioned me over. "I'm Vivian. I haven't seen you before."

"I'm Corendo." I was too hungry to refuse. I hovered over her fire while she stirred the pot. She was maybe ten years older than me, but she still wore her hair loose rather than tied back. Alviva had just started to tie her hair back, as all the grown women in our village did. "What kind of mushrooms?" I asked.

"Chanterelles." She served the stew over torn up bits of bread, and I had never tasted anything so delicious.

Her portal was made of unfinished oak with no decoration at all. If all the portals were as simple as that, mine might stand out among them and I could sell it easily the next day. She saw me looking at it. "Would you like to go through?"

She ushered me into a forest of oak and maple trees, the canopy of leaves overhead so thick that there was little undergrowth and no low branches. Hanging from the high branches were swings made from light. The ropes were twisted strands of dawn, the seats flexible ribbons of sunlight or meshes of sparkles from a lake. There were bench swings made of planks of sea glare, and even a few hammocks tied

between trees, their fabric a plaid of red and yellow from a sunset.

"Try one," said Vivian.

I chose a rope swing, a strand of green from a rainbow tied to a narrow board of lightning bolt. I straddled the rope and the seat sent a tingling through me, a yearning for something I had but couldn't find. I pushed myself to the top of a bank nearby, then flung myself sideways and went spinning in large loops out into the forest. I held on with both hands, leaned back and watched the canopy spin above me. "This is glorious," I shouted.

"Can I see your portal?" she asked.

"Of course," I said, but hers was so joyous and free that mine suddenly felt limited. I brought the swing to a stop and staggered dizzily back out.

There were pears in the trees again in my portal and the place was beautiful, but so many features could be different, maybe better. Why wasn't there a swing?

Vivian sighed. "This is exquisite, Corendo." She walked to a small writing desk and ran her fingers over the brass inlay–plows, rolling pins, spindles, awls, all the tools of our village arranged in an intricate pattern. "I've never seen a portal like this."

If Vivian liked it, surely I'd be able to sell it. I belonged in the guild among these people.

The next morning, Vivian gave me oatmeal and I brought her some pears. "We have time to visit the other portals before the market opens," she said.

I brushed the leaves off my clothes, hoping I didn't look too rumpled. Vivian seemed to know all

the guild members, and they welcomed me warmly when she introduced me. The portals were endlessly wonderful, and at first I lost myself in the experience of being there. I entered a land of people with their faces on their stomachs and became one of them and feasted with them, apples and blueberries straight into my stomach. In a crystal mansion lit by sunshine, I became crystal, casting rainbows among rainbows. My favorite was a place of grass and rain, warm enough that I was never cold, and the rain washed me, my skin, my clothes, my hair. When I stepped out, I was dry and clean and refreshed.

The last portal we visited was an archway of rock. I stepped through into utter darkness. I took a step, and my knees hit something. "Vivian," I called.

"It's alright," she answered. "It's a bench with a harp on it. You play the harp."

I barely knew what a harp was. I sat on the bench, reassuringly smooth and well crafted, and set the harp on my lap. The strings were perfectly smooth, not ragged like on the fiddle the cobbler played at dances. I plucked one note. A bell-shaped flower lit up above me, bright red. I played another string and another flower lit up. When I ran my thumb from the shortest string down to the longest, playing all the notes between, the darkness filled with glowing flowers, and I could see the bushes they grew on, the bench where I sat, and the golden harp in my lap. When I stood up, the harp dissolved into my hands, and I left the portal soaked in melody that sang of impending loss.

"Vivian," I said as we left. "These portals are all wonderful. I don't have a chance against them."

"Against them?" She bit into an apple she had brought from the stomach feasters. "They are all wonderful and so different."

I tried again. "I'm afraid buyers will choose their work, not mine."

"I've given up guessing what people will choose," she said. "I make portals that give me delight, and I sell enough to get by. All of us do that."

Cold clawed through me. "What happens to the ones you don't sell?"

"Portals can't be damaged by weather or wear, but if people don't use them, they disintegrate."

"How horrible." We arrived back, and I laid my hand on my cherrywood portal, trying not to imagine how it would change if it didn't sell. I'd seen enough abandoned cottages to know how wood sags and splinters, how the earlywood erodes down from the latewood amid the stench of rot.

A cluster of laughing people came by. One looked through the lattice on my portal, and my heart pounded. Would she go in? "Come on," said one of her friends, and she ran to catch up with them.

Finally, a tall man approached and ran his fingers over the finish. He pinched the bridge of his nose and asked, "May I go through?"

"Certainly," I said and stopped myself from clenching my hands together. He gave a delighted hum when he took hold of the handle. A few minutes later, he came out pinching the bridge of his nose again. "Tools?" he said. "Really? Fine brass inlay

work, and you portray junk you can find in any village."

My face burned as he walked away. I hadn't thought how incongruous my portal was. If I had crafted it better, the visitor would have admired it. I was ashamed of my village and angry with myself for being ashamed.

"It does get through to you sometimes," said Vivian. "Not everyone will like your portal, however wonderful it is. I try not to care what people think, but sometimes I can't help it."

In the afternoon, the fair buzzed with news. "The king is coming."

I saw dust rising in the distance, then a team of six horses pulling an ebony carriage. The shape was graceful, but it seemed a terrible waste of such a precious wood. The carriage passed by Vivian's swing portal and came to a stop in front of me. I was too stunned to move. Two footmen leapt from the back and set steps by the carriage door. The king emerged, a jeweled crown on his head, a fur-trimmed cloak of burgundy velvet around his shoulders. He descended and stood in front of my portal, running his fingertips along the mullions, touching the fragile lattice.

Vivian nudged me, and my voice croaked only a little as I said, "Sire, would you like to enter?"

He didn't answer but pivoted the handle and swept through. Dust filled my nose and my lungs as I waited. The footmen didn't move. A bee landed on my cheek and I was afraid to brush it away.

Finally, the portal opened again, and the bee flew away.

"Fine work, young man," the king said, so loudly all the guild members must have heard him. I could hardly believe it. The king was going to buy my portal. I could flood our village with the riches we knew only by rumor. I could make more, and everyone would admire my work. Who better than a carpenter to make portals after all.

"Fine work, indeed," the king repeated, "I don't need it though. I have a place just like it in my palace. A hundred carpenters and carvers and gardeners worked for a year to make it, and it didn't need magic at all. No, when I buy a portal, I expect it to take me somewhere wonderful and strange, a place that can exist only by magic." He ascended into his carriage and rode on in a swirl of dust.

I stared down at the crushed grass where the carriage had stood. I had no business making portals. All the ones I'd visited at the fair were impossible without magic, and what I had achieved was only a mundane work of craft. I was a carpenter and nothing more. I sagged against the cherrywood, and its magic tingled through me, my magic.

Vivian touched my shoulder. "It's a great honor, you know," she said. "The king hardly ever goes through portals, and he hasn't bought one in three years. You'll be able to sell yours easily now. And you'll get a good price."

"No," I said. "If I sold it, someone would use it for a while, and then leave it in a storage room

somewhere and it would disintegrate. I'm going home."

Vivian stared at me. "You would waste this opportunity? It won't come again. One sale will qualify you to join the guild. Look, customers are heading this way. There's a wealthy marquis and a merchant with a vast mansion."

"I'm a carpenter, not a portal maker. My friend tried to tell me. I thought she lacked ambition, but she was right. Carpentry takes as much skill as magic. I yearn to smooth wood to a silky finish, to match the grain in a cabinet, to glue pieces so you can never see the seam, to conceal joints so a tabletop seems suspended in midair."

Vivian wiped her hands on her tunic. "I admire you," she said. "I was a weaver once. I'd never go back, but I can understand your choice. The guild does change you."

The next morning, I led the donkey cart through the village green to the alcove of wild roses. I wasn't surprised to see Alviva sitting there making a daisy chain.

"I'm back," I said.

After all the strangers at Thistleton Fair, Alviva's face was more thrilling than any portal magic, a friend who knew me well. Then the brilliance faded from her expression. "You sold your portal. Now you'll move away to join the guild, won't you."

"No," I said. "I'm a carpenter, just like you're a chandler, and I already have what I yearned for, to live in this village. With you. The portal belongs here, too, where everyone in the village can enjoy it."

Together, we unloaded the portal and set it up in the wild-rose alcove. “Are you hungry after that long trip?” she asked.

“Starving.” I pivoted the cherrywood handle. “We can feast on pears.”

LM ZAERR

LM Zaerr is a writer and medievalist. As a professor, she wrote a book on medieval storytelling, sang forgotten tales, and lured students into medieval legends, where she abandoned them to challenge dragons, rescue Lancelot, and figure out how to play *gwyddbwyll*. Now she finds new stories and transforms old ones. Her work has appeared in *Uncharted*, *Mythaxis*, and *New Myths*, among other venues. Visit her at lmzaerr.com.

Q&A with LM Zaerr

The following questions were posed by Coll Marshall, author of *Enough*, and are answered by LM Zaerr about their story *The Portal Makers of Thistleton Fair.*

I love stories where magic is learnt as one skill alongside others and integrated into everyday life. I particularly like how Corendo's woodworking experience shapes the portal's magic. Do you have a personal interest in carpentry or other crafts where you watch your own skills develop with experience?

> I love the idea of magic integrated with more mundane skills, and this story is definitely inspired by everyday life. My husband builds furniture out of quarter-sawn cherrywood: the wood grain of a book cabinet flows around my books; a table floats in midair, apparently unsupported; a basswood trellis in a cupboard door offers glimpses of treasures within. Mark's work seems like magic to me, and often he has

> no way of knowing exactly what will emerge. Writing feels similar. I craft portals that invite people to explore other realms. Part of it is craft, and that part can be developed methodically, but part is magic, and I have no real control over when it will come or what fruit it will yield.

There's a realization towards the end that making lots of money isn't the only goal of work. Was this an intended theme from the start, or was it something that surfaced as you wrote?

> I'd say connection between work and money is a theme throughout, but at the beginning it is notable by its absence. Maybe this is an unconventional way of approaching theme, a kind of balance. In the village, making money isn't a focus, so the lack of attention to money functions as a kind of theme. In contrast, the whole purpose of the fair is buying and selling, yet Corendo finds community there, too. Vivian and others have found healthy ways of existing in the fair environment, maintaining the value of community in a world of commodity.

It seemed to me that accepting who you are is an important theme in this story. Corendo realizes he loves his carpentry work and his village. It feels like this realization is the beginning of further stories. Do you have more stories planned in this setting?

What a great idea! In the instant I read your question, I thought, *I want to write a story about Alviva and it might involve Babylon candles.* What happens when Alviva tries adding goatsbeard lichen to a candle and is carried to Faerie? Will she be tempted to stay? Her chandlery gets her there. How will she get back?

Out of the Rain

By Alicia Adams

This story is the third installment of an ongoing series of interrelated stories that is being serialized by Hearth Stories, beginning with "Dandelion" in Issue One.

"Out of the Rain" is adapted from "Goin Into the House," by J. S. Fletcher, 1894

It's two days journey from Farm with Horses to Farm by the Fen. A bird can fly over the trees in the forest in under an hour, but for the folk, all of us but the size of a sparrow's wing, it's a hard day's walk through thick tree growth, up and down steep hills, and all with the constant start and stop of hiding from animals that might want us for supper. Though some of us are quick as mice, and though some can

run great distances, it's two days however you take it, though short days or long depends.

The folk came together long ago to build a shelter at the halfway. It was to this halfway that I set, on my first day's walk from farm to farm. It was late afternoon, and I was still a great distance from the shelter when the first rains came.

It was not a drizzle, but great, fat drops that fell. The kind that could give a person a concussion and lay them out to die in the woods. And so I ran beneath a great tree, searching for the biggest oak leaf to guard my head from the water.

It was the smell that caught me first—the smell of rain as it hits fallen blackberries. Then the scent of flowers just past bloom. From beneath my oak leaf, I searched for the source of the smell. I circled the tree trunk beside me, climbing over its giant roots, until I found it.

Folk lived there for sure, or at least had done. It was a copse of oak trees that served as their homes, and all around the trees were plants where their dead were buried. There was a hodgepodge of all kinds of plants growing tangled together. Ivy clung to the side of one tree. Beside it, a long stretching bush of blackberries, though the late-season fruits were molding along the ground and beset by insects. Mint and borage proliferated beside it, adding to the intoxicating smell of the garden. And all sorts of shrubs and vines and flowers—fiddlenecks, lupines, buckwheat, and milkweed, which spilled the fluffy white contents of its seedpods in a dampening mess.

A tall, solitary sunflower hung its heavy head over the garden.

Out of the rain, I could imagine this garden covered in bees and butterflies, but now, in the poor weather, my eyes were drawn to holes along the leaves. There were the brown and black spots of disease. It was a place where the folk had once lived, yes, but it looked abandoned now.

Even so, I reasoned there would be shelter, and it was shelter I needed. Holding my oak leaf high, I ran to the trees in search of a door and knocked when I found one nestled among the roots. I expected no answer and to let myself in, but a voice came through the door, the voice of an old man.

"A moment! A moment!" he called through the door. And a long moment it was, me by the door beneath my wet oak leaf, water dripping down my arms.

A man with a long gray beard opened the door, and with a look at the sky he bid me come in.

"Thank you," I said. And then, "I didn't expect rain."

"It's been looking to start," the man said. "We've been watching the clouds gather here at the window."

From another room came an old woman holding a small blanket. Her back was bent so far I could hardly see her face, only a bundle of white hair, and her steps were uneven and labored as she carried the blanket to me.

"Thank you," I said. I dried my arms and wrapped the blanket round my shoulders.

It was a nice home, I could see. The great space hewn into the tree had many levels reachable by stair or ladder. I had the sense that my hosts did not get up there much these days, nor anyone else. The furniture I could see was covered in dust with even a few long strands of spider web from wall to wall. I wondered at how these two would fare against an intruding spider.

On the ground floor, there were great soft chairs. Not the wooden chairs of my own home left years past, but great upholstered chairs, stuffed and fluffy and comfortable. There were great carved-out bedrooms with large beds in each. A table fit to seat twelve stood before the biggest kitchen I'd ever seen, with pots and pans of real metal hanging from a string above. From the look of the house and the garden outside, I knew this house must be generations old, passed from family to family through the ages.

While I looked from house to window, where the rain pelted down over the neglected garden, the old couple sat side by side in their armchairs, holding hands between them, and said nothing.

I was struck by the sad looks of the two folk. They sat looking down at the wooden floor as if willing it to turn into a sinkhole and swallow them up. Now and then the woman shook her white-capped head and sighed. And as the woman's sigh ended, the man shook his own head or stroked his beard and clicked his tongue. I sensed there must be trouble for the old family.

"It seems I've caught you on a bad day," I said.

The old man shook his head and said nothing. The woman, straining against her hunched back to look up, said, "There are those worse off than us."

"Cori is right," the man said. "There are those off worse, though we've had our troubles, her and me."

"I'm sorry to hear that," I said. "In such a beautiful house, I'd think you'd be settling into the quiet life."

"A beautiful house, yes," the woman Cori said. "I've lived here my whole life. I was born in this tree, and I'd hoped to die in it and be buried right outside with all my family here."

"No, Cori. Now don't start," the man said. "We don't know how things will go. Maybe it is all for the best."

The woman bowed her head back down and lifted her free hand to her forehead, as though even this small conversation were too much to bear.

"You see, Cori's back's been hurting her a while now. And my knees aren't what they used to be. There's plenty of food around here if we can harvest and can it. But the older we get, the harder it is to do for ourselves," the man said. "You've caught us on our last day here. When tomorrow comes, we'll pack what we can carry and make a slow trip to one of the farms they've got round here. The closer one. Whatever they call it."

"Farm with Horses." I went to the table and pulled one of the chairs over so I could sit beside them. My heart hurt for the old couple. I knew what it meant to leave this place. Their home for generations. Their garden out front. They were too

old to set about building a new house. They'd have to go from door to door at the farm and ask to be taken in by everyone they met. They'd have to hope someone could take them both in together and not one or the other.

"It's been a hard choice," the man said. "We've been sitting with it for a long time. Probably too long. Probably we should have set out long ago."

"There used to be so many folk out this way," the woman said. "All my brothers and sisters grew up here. And my cousins. And all our family friends. We used to take care of our old folk. Took care of them in their own homes. But when the farms came up, all the folk moved away. Hyssop and I stayed and tended the garden and took care of the homes, but they never came back. They chose the safety and convenience of living near humans over the life we had here. It was such a beautiful life here."

"It was," the man said. "It was." He looked down at his partner's hand, interlaced with his. "I only hope we can stay together, Cori and me. I hope we find some kin out there who can care for both of us. We've been together over 50 years, Cori and me. I would miss her if she lived in another house, and I know she'd miss me, too."

The woman said nothing but hung her head.

I wished I could promise they would stay together at the farm, that someone would take them in both. But though I was mostly sure they'd both find care in the community, I didn't know for sure that they'd find that care together.

"Do you have no children who could help you?" I asked.

The man shook his head, and the woman sighed a deep sigh.

"We had three," the man said. "But all are gone. Our sweet Sunflower died very young. Mint moved into the tree behind us when he was of age, but we lost him to the animals, poor boy."

"And the third?" I asked.

"Our youngest was Nettle," the man said. "He was a wild one, Nettle. Running through the woods making all kinds of noise. Climbing to the highest branches in the canopy. Always on the search for adventure."

"He was a kind boy, our Nettle. A kinder child has never lived and breathed," the woman said.

"A good heart," the man Hyssop agreed. "He disappeared without a word, some 20 years past. We never learned what happened to him. We expect he died long ago."

"We mourned our Nettle long ago."

"And since then," the man said. "We've been just the two of us in this house."

"We've gotten to be so set in our life," Cori said. "I won't stand being in a small corner in someone else's house and for someone else to be telling us what to do and how to live."

"Oh Cori, it might not be as bad as that," the man said. "The only way to know is to go and see."

"Then I will take this chair," the woman said, slapping the arm of her chair. "I've sat in this same chair all my life. It was my grandmother's chair. I

held my babies in it, and fed them, and watched them fall asleep in my arms. I've sat beside you every night in this chair. I won't leave without it."

"It will be a hard journey even without dragging a chair along," Hyssop said.

"It breaks my heart," Cori said to me. "I can't explain how it feels. We've lived here since the beginning, and there's not a more beautiful place in the world. I used to sit out by the garden and watch the bees travel from flower to flower. And smell the earth that is our earth on my hands as we tended the garden. I don't want to leave here now that I'm old. I'd rather die here."

"But we still have some years left, Cori. We can live them at the farm. We can see what it's like."

The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and amid the light pattering of drops I heard the thud of footfalls coming through the garden toward the door. Not someone running through the rain, but careful, thoughtful steps. Hyssop heard them, too, and started to slowly rise from his chair.

"Sit, please," I said. "I can get the door."

"Probably someone else wanting in from the rain. Tell them they can come in and stay dry with us."

I opened the door to a tall man with broad shoulders. His long, brown beard had streaks of gray in it, and there was a long scar beside one eye. But his eyes had a gleam of innocence as though there was still a child behind all those years.

"Is this still the home of Coriander and Hyssop?" the man at the door asked.

There was a sharp cry from the woman behind me. "Nettle! It's my baby Nettle. Hyssop! Our Nettle has come home!"

I stood aside and let Nettle into the house. I saw Hyssop slowly rising from his chair and Coriander stretching out her hands for her boy.

And quietly, I slipped from the house and back into the rain, only light drops now, to leave the family to their sudden reunion.

Past the garden I turned and snuck round to peer in through a window. The large man was kneeling by his mother, whose hands were at his cheeks and beard. The father stood behind, waiting his turn, his face red and blinking back tears. I turned back toward the halfway, where I would rest for the night, and my face was wet with more than rain, though the rain came fast all around.

It was more than a week later that I made my way from Farm by the Fen on the way back toward Farm with Horses and beyond. It was a bright, sunny day as I passed the old house, and the young man was outside pruning leaves in the garden and collecting seeds for the new season. On the doorstep, in two chairs set side by side, were Coriander and Hyssop, holding hands as they'd been the day I first saw them. I saw from my spot in the trees that Hyssop had trimmed his beard and wore a broad-brimmed hat in a style I had only seen on my most distant travels. And Coriander, sitting just a bit straighter to watch her son in the garden, wore a new green dress with lace at the collar. They did not look as though they

were setting to leave. And I gathered they would stay in their house for years to come.

ALICIA ADAMS

Alicia Adams lives in the forest with her spouse, young daughter, and cat. Her works are featured or forthcoming in *DreamForge*, *Abyss & Apex*, and *Luna Station Quarterly*. You can visit her website at aliciaadamswriting.com.

Notes on "Out of the Rain"

By Alicia Adams

When I started to write stories about the folk, I came to it with the idea that I wanted to write happy, optimistic stories. I had been reading Frog and Toad stories to my daughter, and they felt so much warmer and more necessary than any of the stories I had been reading or writing. These were the stories I needed in my life, and I had trouble finding them for adults.

After writing "You Are Always Welcome Here," the second story in this series, my partner asked me what was next. I told him I wanted to write a story that made me feel the way that "Goin Into The House" by J. S. Fletcher made me feel.

The first time I experienced "Goin Into the House," it was recounted to me out loud. I heard about the traveller going into the home of the old couple (already a dying custom in our world) and hearing about their life. Their need to go into the workhouse (a devastating outcome for anyone, especially an old couple), the loss of their children,

one of whom was missing. When they heard steps outside, I knew as the listener that it was their long-lost child coming home. I knew, and I rolled my eyes, because stories can't be that easy anymore. It was unearned, cheesy. And when I found out for sure that it was their child coming home, I was surprised by my reaction. I broke into the biggest smile. I felt ... glee. I laughed and felt so much relief for this fictitious couple who got to stay in their home and got their child back to boot. In short, I loved this story. It broke all the rules, and I loved it.

"Goin Into The House" was in the public domain, so my partner reminded me that it was fair use—I could adapt it into a folk story. And while it felt like cheating in some ways, it also felt like I got to honor J. S. Fletcher and his story and maybe bring more readers back to him.

Of course, there's no workhouse for the folk. In some ways, I've written a Utopia. But all Utopias have downsides. I had to decide how the folk took care of their older people. I had to show how much Coriander and Hyssop would lose by leaving their home. I made them wealthy instead of poor and got to explore what that looked like for the folk. It was a fun project.

But it was sad, too. This story always reminds me of my grandmother, one of my favorite people in the world. My grandmother didn't want to leave her house, but for our family it was the best choice. We were close enough to visit her at a very nice eldercare facility, and we did until 2020 when the Covid pandemic hit. My grandmother didn't make it

through the pandemic. I wish we could have kept her home, like Coriander and Hyssop were able to stay home. While the stakes for Coriander and Hyssop are emotional more than physical, to me they still feel high.

Because this story is an adaptation, I feel more permission to love it. If the turn at the end feels cheesy and unearned, I get it. That's how I felt at first. But there's something magical in that, too.

> You can read the original story by J. S. Fletcher, "Goin Into the House," on archive.org as part of his collection *The Wonderful Wapentake* (1895) at the following web address: https://archive.org/details/wonderfulwapent00fletgoog/page/n38/mode/2up.

Enough

By Coll Marshall

"Keep chopping!" someone called.

Halreth ignored the pain in his hands and kept cutting. They needed the wood, he told himself. He paused and looked at the hillside. In three days, the small village had cut sixty trees. Every so often, one of the villagers would call out to remind the others to keep chopping. He paused, spotting horn root growing in the leaves on the ground. Out of habit, he dug the root, popped a piece in his mouth and stashed the rest in his tunic. It was a good thing to keep for chasing fever and clearing the mind. It wouldn't survive without the shade. It was a pity, Halreth thought looking about. Here, where the smaller trees at the forest edge gave way to the older, larger trees was a good place to find herbs. He saw shadowleaf growing nearby. He could use it in a poultice to ease the blisters on his hands. The shadowleaf would die with the trees gone; it needed the forest's protection. He looked up the slope,

seeking out the different plants and their uses. Their woodcutting would soon reach the hollow where moss was gathered, and mushrooms grew. These would die too. Years as a village healer, and he was cutting the forest that provided what the village needed for healing and to supplement the grains and vegetables they grew.

They had to keep chopping. "Keep chopping!" someone else called in tune with his own thoughts. Strange, but he hadn't thought the words in his own voice. He bit down on the horn root, as his axe bit into a trunk, wondering whose voice he'd thought with. "Keep chopping!" the voice in his mind repeated. "You need to chop the wood to sell so you have coin to buy things." It was a strange notion. They'd never needed to sell wood before. The village sat at the end of a narrow track that wound through the mountains and rarely saw more than a handful of visitors each season. What use had they for coins in a village without strangers, where folk bartered for what they couldn't provide themselves? When someone had a poor season, that person was likely family, or as close to it as counts; it was a small thing to tide them over till the next season.

"Keep chopping!" someone further down the mountain called. It sounded like Casgari, the smith. It wasn't her voice he heard in his mind, repeating the same command. Casgari cut the occasional tree to make charcoal for the forge. Halreth paused and glanced down the slope at the open space. It looked as though almost every villager was present down to the youngest child. Only the very young or the very

old were without an axe, and these stood by idly, expressionlessly as the others cut down the trees of the old forest. Strange, he thought. They'd cut every tree in their path. Every villager, from the smallest child to the most wizened elder knew the forest would provide wood if you took one tree here and another there and didn't return to cut in the same place for several years. It was a strange thing they were doing. Why were they doing this?

"Keep chopping." Ghialda the midwife stood near him, hefting an axe. She'd said it quietly, a questioning look on her face. Halreth worried about her. She was too old to be doing this work for such long hours. She nodded to him, encouragingly and he began cutting again. They needed the wood to sell, he said to himself. Or was it the other voice saying it?

Why were they cutting? The thought shoved its way into his mind. They had to cut, to get wood to sell, his mind answered as though a different person was talking. They'd not done this before, not until the sorcerer had arrived. He'd gathered them in the village square and simply told them. "You have to cut the forest," he'd said, "to sell the wood for coin to buy what you want." It was a nonsensical notion to village folk dependent on the forest for food, medicine and to protect the barley and wheat fields from the mountain wind. It was a lot of effort, and a lot of time taken away from other tasks that needed doing with the planting season almost upon them. It made no sense now, but when the sorcerer had said it, it'd made perfect sense.

"Why are we cutting so many trees?" he asked Ghialda.

"We have to cut the trees, to sell the wood for coin," she answered simply.

It made sense now, Halreth thought. Yet it didn't. Ghialda's face screwed up in confusion.

"That's right, isn't it?"

"We need the—" Halreth began, then stopped. He put the axe down.

"Keep chopping!" Farduye called to him. The farmer looked at ease with her axe. "We need to sell the wood to buy what we want. We already owe the sorcerer for the axes he supplied."

Halreth picked up the axe. He had to keep cutting to pay for the axe, then to buy—

He didn't need an axe, aside from cutting this tree. He had a couple of sharp sickles and a good shovel for digging roots but there wasn't much need for a healer to own an axe. Farduye was right in that the axe had come from the sorcerer when he'd arrived three days earlier. Halreth chopped again. They had to keep chopping till the forest on the slope was gone. Why did the sorcerer need the forest gone? We need wood to sell for coin, his mind answered.

He was hungry he realised. The horn root in his mouth was finished and he tried to think when he'd last eaten. No time for speculation, he told himself, you need to keep chopping. He swung the axe. We need to cut the wood—

He *was* hungry. The sorcerer had organized several of the villagers to gather bread from everyone's huts and feed people each morning. It wasn't a lot, but it

kept them going. No-one complained. No-one said anything except "Keep chopping."

Halreth put down his axe and fished out his piece of horn root and took another bite, enjoying the bitter juice in his mouth. He swallowed the juice and proceeded to chew. He picked up the axe, but stopped, thinking "We need to stop this." He looked up at the midwife. "Ghialda, we need to stop."

Ghialda shook her head, ignoring the strands of grey hair that fell into her eyes. He stepped forward and gripped her axe. "We need to stop," he repeated.

"We need to cut—"

"Here." He broke off a piece of horn root and passed it to her. "You must be hungry."

"Keep chopping!" someone called from the slope above them.

Ghialda took the root and bit. She paused for a moment, enjoying the rich flavour. She sighed and looked up at him. "I'm too old for this," she said. He nodded. "But we need to cut the wood—"

"We don't."

"We—" she looked up and down the slope. "We don't do we? Then why—" her face drained of colour. "The forest!" she gasped at last. "Why did we do this?"

"The sorcerer," Halreth said. He passed her more horn root. "Something in his words made us obey."

"Keep cutting," Farduye called to them. She had finished the tree she'd been cutting and stepped to the next. The trees lay where they fell and none were gathered, for selling or otherwise. "We need to cut the trees to sell for coin."

Halreth turned back to his tree. He had to keep chopping. They needed the wood to–

"No!" Ghialda screamed. "Stop!"

Halreth stopped. He'd forgotten. This was wrong. He turned back to Ghialda. "No," he said, nodding.

"We need the wood—" Farduye began.

"We don't need the wood," Ghialda responded.

"But we need ..." Farduye's voice trailed off.

"Give her some of the horn root," Ghialda said to Halreth.

He passed the farmer a piece. She gave him a puzzled look but put it in her mouth. She resumed cutting but after a few strokes she turned and asked, "Why don't we need the wood?"

"The forest provides whatever wood we need," Halreth said, "but we don't need to clear this slope. If we clear further up the slope, we'll disturb the ground and the stream running down to the village could foul."

Farduye nodded. She pointed at the fields on the slope below them. "If we clear much more, those fields will be exposed to the autumn frosts." She sighed. "But we have to keep chopping. We need the wood to sell for coin to buy ..." Her voice trailed off again, then she exclaimed, "But I haven't bought anything with coin in my life."

Halreth nodded.

"So why?" Farduye asked, looking about.

"Sorcerer," Ghialda said.

Farduye's face showed confusion, then the light of remembrance as she looked down towards the village where the pavilion stood shading the dozing

sorcerer. Two villagers fanned him. "He said we had to." Her voice was confused now.

"Magic," Ghialda said.

Halreth said, "Some sort of charm in his words. Seems to get reinforced when someone says, 'Keep chopping.'" He immediately regretted saying the last two words, cursing himself for being so stupid. However, nothing happened.

"You just said the words," Ghialda observed.

Halreth nodded. "And it hasn't sent us back chopping."

"Don't we need to keep chopping?" Farduye asked.

"No!" Ghialda snapped.

"No, we don't," Halreth said gently. "We don't need to clear the forest. That's just the sorcerer's magic making you think that."

Farduye nodded. Her face moved from concern to sadness before returning to concern. She looked up the hill. "Jazrelon!" She peered about before setting eyes on her husband, thirty paces away. She headed to him, calling his name and the names of her children.

"We'd best go with her," Halreth said.

"We need to—" Ghialda began, then changed to "Bah" and shook her head roughly. She started off after Farduye. Halreth caught her quickly. They made slower progress than Farduye, not being driven by concern for children but slowed by Ghialda's limp. The old woman ought to have her cane with her, Halreth thought, shaking his head.

"Do you have enough of that horn root for everyone?" she asked.

Halreth shook his head again. "There's not much more horn root, but I hope we don't need it. The horn root clears the head, so it helps, but the magic's malignance is from people repeating it to each other. When I said the words before they affected Farduye but not you and me. It only had a little effect. We could easily remind her we didn't have to chop."

"But she did eat some."

"True." Halreth hoped he was right.

Several people called to them as they passed, urging them to keep chopping. Ghialda simply said, "No we don't have to." One or two looked confused but all resumed work.

"That didn't stop them," she said.

"It's not going to be easy."

They reached Farduye, who agitatedly spoke with her husband.

"We *don't* need to!" she insisted.

"We need to cut the wood," her husband explained, "to sell for coin."

"We don't need coin, Jazrelon, don't you see?"

"How would we buy the things we need without coin?"

"What things?" Farduye implored. "Everything we have we either produce or we trade for, here or in the other mountain villages. The only thing we need coins for are the fancy things merchants sell–things we don't need."

"We need coins to buy the things we need," Jazrelon replied patiently, "so we need to keep chopping."

Farduye turned, her face appealing to Halreth.

Halreth said, "We have everything we need in the village."

"But if we cut the wood—"

"The forest will die," Halreth put in. "And the fields will lose protection from the frosts."

Jazrelon paused at this, glancing down at the fields. He nodded. "But if we chop wood, we can sell it ..." His voice trailed off. He looked from Halreth to Farduye. Halreth saw the same confusion he'd seen on Farduye and Ghialda's faces. "It'll be impossible to grow grain."

"Well, that wasn't so hard," Ghialda commented.

Halreth looked about the hillside, wondering whom to approach next. He turned suddenly at the sound of axe on wood.

"Jazrelon!" Farduye exclaimed.

"Stop!" Ghialda yelled.

"Keep chopping!" someone else called.

Jazrelon stopped. "I just thought I ought to ..." Again, his voice trailed off. He looked up and down the slope. "We need to stop people."

Immediately he strode off, calling to another farmer. Farduye caught up with him and diverted him towards one of their children. Soon the three were in animated conversation, or rather Jazrelon and Farduye animatedly urged their fifteen-year-old to stop, while the younger one patiently explained

about the need for wood and coins. It didn't take long to convince him.

"Seems that worked," Ghialda said.

"Seems some people need more convincing than others," Halreth replied. "Helps to put it in terms meaningful to each person.

"Keep chopping!" insisted Melgun, who grew barley, ran the village's small mill and distilled whisky.

Halreth approached him, with Ghialda his shadow. Threat to whisky production seemed to hit home for him. Soon Melgun had stopped chopping, and they moved on to another person. From there, the woodcutting stopped person by person, each convinced person adding their weight to the numbers of those convincing. Soon all tree felling had ceased. People drifted back towards Halreth, looks of confusion, bewilderment and anxiety showing as folk noticed the state of the forest and how hungry they were.

"What now?" someone asked.

"We need to deal with the sorcerer," someone else said.

Halreth simply turned and walked down the slope, making for the pavilion. The village followed him and soon he found himself at the centre of a throng of people gathered about the pavilion.

The sorcerer eyed them derisively as they approached. He said nothing, even when they'd stopped moving. He glared about the group. Finally, he said, "What's this? Why has work stopped? You

need to keep chopping. You need the wood to sell for coin to buy things."

"We don't need that," Halreth said. "We need the forest."

A few others murmured agreement.

"You need to keep chopping," the sorcerer said, his voice calm, soothing. "You need the wood to sell for coin to buy things."

More voices argued with this, louder, angrier. The sorcerer held up his hand and twisted his fingers in an odd motion. The protests ceased. Halreth found his attention drawn tighter to the sorcerer's voice. As the sorcerer spoke now, his voice spoke like a thought in Halreth's head. "Something's come undone in the spell, I see. Perhaps the reality of economics is too much for simple mountain folk. You need to keep chopping. You need the wood to sell for coin. You need the coin to buy things you need. How good it would be when you're freed from your toil in the fields and can just sell wood to buy the things you want. You could leave this lonely village and move to the port towns where there are riches, good food and entertainments." It made sense to Halreth now. Perhaps it was better to cut down the forest. They didn't need it if they left the valley. He could go to one of the big towns and buy what he needed. He could buy warm clothes. He could buy a nice house. He could buy food. He was hungry. He thought about the food he wanted right now, but he didn't have any coins and there was no one here selling food. He remembered the last of the horn root in his tunic. He stuck it in his mouth and bit down,

enjoying the flavour and wishing it did more to fill his belly. He thought about fine food he could buy if he had coin, as he swallowed the first of the juice.

What was he thinking? They couldn't destroy the forest. He wouldn't leave the village. "No!" he said loudly. His voice seemed to have an effect and a couple of others softly repeated the "no."

"What?" the sorcerer glared at him.

"We need the forest. The forest and the village work together. We have little use for your coin."

More people joined in. The sorcerer held up his hand again. Halreth felt the draw but resisted it. "We don't have to listen to you!" he declared, hoping his words would bolster others.

"Well then," the sorcerer sneered. "I climb up this horrid mountain covered in nasty wilderness simply to bring the light of civilization to you backward rustics, and this is the thanks I get." His eyes narrowed and he pointed at Halreth. "You seem determined to lead others astray from my guidance. Perhaps you'd make a good example. Watch all of you and learn. This one will be the first. Will you submit and continue working for me, or shall I turn you into one of the trees you love?" He waved his hands in front of him. His fingers glowed and a few people stepped back. "Well then?"

Halreth stared at the man. He could see now. The sorcerer had said "work for me." The promise of wealth in coins was nothing more than an illusion: an illusion built solely on people repeating it to each other. If he was a tree, he might not remember this life. Would it be the same as being dead? Even so, he

couldn't bear responsibility for the forest's death. "I will not cut down the forest," he said.

The sorcerer blinked in surprise then regained his composure. "I said if you don't—"

"I will not!" Halreth said louder.

The sorcerer looked from Halreth to the other villagers. He didn't change Halreth into a tree.

"We will not," Farduye repeated. Others echoed.

The sorcerer's fingertips dimmed. He looked from person to person, his face crumbling as he realised his illusion had been seen through. His sneer turned to a frown, then a look of concern, then fear.

Melgun the miller strode forward. He still held an axe. He leaned over and glowered at the sorcerer, his face a finger's width away. With his free hand he grabbed the coin purse slung across the sorcerer's shoulder and tore it from him. He turned and cast it up over the villagers' heads. It clanked down at the mouth of the track heading down the mountain. "You have until I walk to that purse to be gone. Take your coins with you if you get to them before me." He strode from the pavilion, walking slowly but purposefully towards the purse.

The sorcerer was shaking. He looked at Halreth. Halreth simply pointed after Melgun and the little man turned and fled, running a wide arc around the miller, scrambling to pick up his purse, then off down the mountain.

People relaxed. There was rejoicing then dismay when they looked at the damaged forest on the slope.

"Not scared of becoming a tree?" Ghialda asked him.

"His magic was an illusion, nothing more," Halreth said. "An illusion reinforced by our compliance. Once we saw through that it was over. I guessed that was the limit of his power."

"But it took three days for us to convince ourselves it was an illusion."

She was right but there'd be time for introspection later. He was a healer again and returned his attention to the villagers' needs. He started with Ghialda, sitting her down in the chair the sorcerer had used, and calling for someone to fetch water. Others needed attending and soon people were organizing food and water.

People asked about the forest. They asked Halreth as though he was the leader. It made him uncomfortable. "The forest will grow back in time," he said, grimacing at the weak words.

"We can transplant smaller trees from other parts of the forest," Casgari the smith replied.

"We can travel further into the forest to get plants we need," Farduye suggested, "especially if the exposed crops are poor."

"We can sell the wood, to buy things we need in the meantime," someone suggested. There was a pause at that, and people looked about now, ashamed and self-conscious.

"No," Halreth said at last. "We can get by without selling wood. We'll use some for charcoal, some for repairs and the rest—" He looked at the pavilion with its wooden poles and cloth sides flapping in the breeze. "We could build a village hall."

People liked the idea. "About time we had one," someone said.

"We can store surplus grain there instead of at home," someone else suggested.

"We could have dances there."

"Singing."

"Prayer."

"Meetings."

Halreth nodded. Meetings, prayer, singing, dancing, even grain storage–these were good things. Things that bound them together. Things that reminded them they were enough.

COLL MARSHALL

Coll Marshall is an aspiring Australian writer of speculative fiction. He lives in the Wide Bay Region of Queensland. His writing is inspired by the green country there, as well as the deep desert of Central Australia where he spent most of his adult life and by the wonderful family and friends with whom he shares the world. He is currently working on the final touches to his first full-length novel, *Dragon Lard.*

Q&A with Coll Marshall

The following questions were posed by LM Zaerr, author of *The Portal Makers of Thistleton Fair*, and are answered by Coll Marshall about their story *Enough*.

What was the germ of this story, that first spark of inspiration?

> Basically, I was listening to something–a podcast or something on TV about how we tell ourselves untruths that reinforce beliefs about ourselves or the world e.g. how we must always seek the highest paying job or "need" the latest phone. A lot of different faiths talk about this: seeing things clearly to escape from the rat race of trying to get more and more.

Why did you choose Halreth the healer for your main character rather than the farmer, or the midwife, or the smith?

The main character being a healer facilitated the story better. As a healer, Halreth habitually collecting horn root and knowing its properties was natural. A farmer and smith might have this knowledge, but a healer was better placed. It also added weight to his dilemma–he was the healer, so felt responsible for getting people out of the trap they were in.

Were there any real life experiences or knowledge that contributed to the story?

I enjoy learning about different religions. Most discuss, in one way or another, that we need to see things as they are, not as we're telling ourselves. (There's more to each faith than that, but it's a theme the comes up.) I've seen a lot of people get trapped in very stressful jobs because they assumed they had to take promotion and earn more money. Also, I've lived in places where too many trees have been removed and the consequences are very visible in the changed countryside.

Has your own thinking changed after writing this story? That is, did the process of creation inspire you with fresh perspectives?

Yes, the characters don't *do* a lot in the story, they simply help each other wake up from the spell they were under. I wasn't sure when I started, what "great thing" they'd need to do to defeat the sorcerer. In the end, being themselves was enough. It has helped me set the tone for

another novel I have floating in the back of my head.

The Hermit, the Inkeeper, and Clem

By Sarah Connell

Cricket song churned across the unbroken mountain range surrounding the small inn. With one hand gripping tight to her walking stick, Clem stood on the doorstep in the fading summer light and tried to think. The door stood ajar before her, a slick of darkness within the peeling red frame.

It had been years since she'd had a visitor. Situated on the western face of a particularly windy pass, even the most curious traveler pointed their feet away from her path overgrown with gorse and brambles. Even the villagers crossed to the other side of the street when she came into town.

She wet her lips and let the wind race across them to chap the already red corners. It had been a long climb up from the valley and her supplies felt more heavy than ever across her aching shoulders. There was nothing for it. If she didn't go in soon and light a fire, she'd begin to cool beneath the layers of cotton,

still damp with the day's sweat, and night was fast on its way.

The stick swayed in her trembling hand as she reached out and prodded open the door. It protested with a loud creak on ancient hinges so big and roughly hewn that no amount of grease could tame them into silence. But for once, Clem was glad of the noise. It added something familiar, something she knew all too well, and courage blossomed within her, giving her strength to step within. The antechamber lay in darkness, save for the shaft of golden late-summer sun spilling in behind her. She paused half in, half out of the threshold, made awkward and slow by her pack. Trying for stealth, she slid one foot forward along the stone floor and then the other until she had to stop and rest her cramping legs.

A soft sound reached her from further in, coming from the direction of the kitchen. She held her breath, heart pounding in rebuke so that she had to let a little air trickle out to keep her ears free from the heady thumping pulse.

Rasp. Silence ...*Rasp.*

It grew neither louder nor changed in timbre as she stood frozen, slowly asphyxiating herself. Finally she gave in and slid her pack to the floor. She sidled forward, stick gripped tightly, until she could peek around the doorframe. The light in the kitchen had always been the best in the whole inn. A large window sat above the sink facing west and the view over the mountain range held wonders no matter the season.

Among the ordinary backdrop of her tidy kitchen with its drying herbs swaying from the rafters and mugs cleaned and ready hanging on their stand, someone sat leaning back in her favorite armchair by the cold hearth. It was from this stranger that the slow rasping noise sounded. And she squinted into the gloom, thanking the same fate that she had cursed moments ago for the impeccable eyesight still afforded her.

A fraying cap of deepest blue framed the sleeping face of a young man, mouth half open, long lashes brushing cheeks not yet downy with beard. Just by the look of him, she could tell he'd spent more nights than he should have out on the mountain without cover. Patches of red deepening to almost purple flushed along his cheekbones and tip of nose. He slept the sleep of the overexhausted not even having bothered to light the fire laid out in the hearth.

Clem put a hand on the kitchen door, meaning to push it open, before caution took hold. Perhaps this stranger was not as alone as he seemed. She peered around but only one pack lay abandoned close to his feet. Snores rose and fell, rhythmic and comforting. When was the last time she'd been this close to another as they slept? Perhaps it had been on her first night here, decades ago.

She shuffled forward and, keeping the large kitchen table between them, craned over until she was so near as to smell the tangy scent of sweat soaking through unwashed layers. He wore the gear of a mountain trekker and his hands looked clear of frostbite though chapped and a little worse for wear

to match the condition of the rest of him. With parted lips, his sleeping face reminded her of someone much younger than his height suggested; he looked a child, not yet ready to be left to his own caretaking. Someone had let this boy go on his way too soon. And within her stirred a memory. She'd known a face like his once—someone dear to her and who called her his own. Such an odd notion, to belong to someone. Shea, that was it, this memory's name. Tawny hair instead of black curls, but just as young, just as unready to face the trials of the mountain as this one. What had become of him, her Shea? Had he left her here? Hadn't she always been alone?

She shook herself. Memories did nothing but pull her down, like a rock tied to an ankle as she tried to break the surface and breathe.

Out of long habit, she scuttled out of the kitchen to check the corridor of doors. The passage leading out into the back hallway had been closed off by a length of fabric that had once held a pattern of interwoven, painted daisies but had long since faded in places to merely the suggestion of yellow. Two rows of ancient wooden doors lined either side of the hall, all shut with only diffused sunlight peeking out beneath to give the hall any light. Ornately carved among layers of filigree curled roman numerals, each marked with a number from one to twenty. Clem touched each massive handle, trying to jostle them. They remained locked and unmovable as always. She let out a sigh and shuffled back through the yellowed curtain.

The stranger snored on. Watching his chest rise and fall, she made up her mind and unwrapped the many layers of scarves and coats and hats from herself, setting them on hooks in the fading sunlight. She took out flint from the tinderbox and struck it onto a pinch of cotton fleece before pushing the burgeoning light further into the kindling, keeping her breath in a steady rhythm until it caught. Once the blaze had caught the rest of the logs, she lit the small stove with a taper and set the teakettle atop to boil.

The kettle whistle woke him.

"Ah, you're back with us," she murmured, her voice hoarse from disuse.

He straightened, looking around with glazed eyes but not speaking.

When his gaze alighted on her, Clem held up the small bundles of dried nettle. "Tea?" She tried to sound cheerful.

He swallowed and took the mug offered him, eyes distant.

"Drink, it'll help," she said, feeling suddenly as if she were the intruder and not him.

He took a sip and then choked before gulping down the rest.

"Should have let it cool before handing it over," she said to herself as he turned from pink to bright red in a matter of seconds with the wisps of steam making its way from the corners of his mouth. He held out the empty mug.

"More?" she asked.

"More." He nodded.

This time, she smiled despite herself. The sound of his scratchy voice was like the first birdsong after the snow melted. But he didn't shy back from her, just waited as she took the kettle and refilled the chipped mug with steaming tea. He sipped this one slower and she watched him cautiously as he began to revive. When he put the empty mug back on the kitchen table and pulled the hat from his head, she asked, "what is your name?"

He fidgeted, not meeting her eyes. "Jack. Who are you?"

"I'm the Innkeeper," she said, not wanting to spook him with her real title, the one everyone else knew her by—the Hermit.

"I'm at an inn?" He looked around him.

"Don't you remember how you got here?"

Jack shook his head slowly, running his hand through the tuft of hair that had been matted down by sweat and grime under his cap. "I just remember—" he hesitated and looked up at her, pleading with his eyes.

Clem refilled both their mugs before putting the kettle back on the stove and taking a seat across from him. "It's okay to not remember much at first. You've had a hard journey."

"But where am I?" he asked with the edge of a whine that made Clem's chest tighten.

My home—Clem wanted to say. But that wasn't wholly true, not for his journey at least. "This place has had many names," she said instead.

His gaze strayed over to the kitchen window where the mountains and valleys rose unbroken beyond. "Where are the other guests?"

"It's perhaps a little different than any inn you've visited before," she admitted. "In fact, we haven't had a guest in ... well a very long time." She bit her lip. Why had she said *we*? But Jack seemed not to have noticed.

He blinked. "Why not?"

"People change. Not many can make it up here anymore," she said, shrugging. "Starting out is half the battle. So few are equipped to seek adventure like they used to. And then, well, there's the journey itself."

Jack nodded, a look of contemplation darkening his features.

"What's the last thing you remember?" she tried again.

His forehead wrinkled as he thought. "A feeling," he said softly. "Like I was following a compass deep inside me pulling me North until I just put one foot in front of the other."

She grew still as he spoke, leaning slightly forward, her hands cupping the warm mug. It had been a lifetime since she'd had anyone to speak of the journey with.

"Every step took me closer to something or somewhere ... but I also felt like I was losing pieces along the way." He looked down at the pack at his feet and became silent. Jack bent his head and picked at a thread coming loose in his sleeve.

"What is it?" she urged, feeling as if she could see his memories unraveling before her.

"I just realized—I don't know if I have anything to pay you with," he said at last in a voice made quiet by embarrassment. "For the tea, much less for a room."

Clem waved him away and drew herself up. "Don't worry about payment. I have everything I need here. Plenty to share with you."

The room had darkened while they talked, but it took just a moment to light the fire she'd set in the hearth that morning before heading out. Jack looked on, still lost in his thoughts, as she moved from candle to candle, lighting each with a long taper from the stove.

She set a basin of steaming water and a cake of soap tied to a rag cloth on the hearth at his feet. "Take a moment to wash while I heat the supper."

Jack sat for a moment, watching the fire dance on the water's surface before dipping down to remove his boots and socks. The socks beneath had more holes than thread. Parts of his toes were tipped black and more than one was missing the nail. Clem swallowed against the lump of pity in her throat but he didn't seem to notice as he slid one foot into the basin and then the other. She turned away and busied herself about the meal to let him wash in peace. Bearing witness to the slow decay of the youth made it somehow all the more grim.

By the time she set out two bowls of beans stewed with potatoes and mint, Jack looked more vibrant than ever. The spots of color on his cheeks had faded

from purple to the bruised red of a highland nasturtium. He'd splashed water through his hair too and was finger combing it back behind his ears to drip dry down the back of his neck facing the fire.

He smiled up at her as she sat opposite him and she found herself more than a bit bashful, a wholly unsettling emotion that she'd long since thought herself incapable of.

"Cheers," he said through his smile and set to eating as if he hadn't had anything in days.

She spooned up a bite and blew on it before popping it into her mouth and swallowing. It was warm and rich and made her realize just how worn out she was from her long day of trekking down to the village and back. He'd had seconds and thirds by the time she'd finished her final spoonful, lapsing into a near nap, only to startle awake when her spoon clinked into the empty bowl.

"Time for a good night's sleep, I think." She smiled at him, no longer shy.

He yawned, stretching. "Are you sure it's no problem giving me a room tonight?"

Clem hesitated in the act of cleaning up. "Oh, I think it's best if you sleep here next to the hearth fire. Should be a cold night."

"Of course." Jack took up his bowl, turning to the sink.

"I'll just grab you a blanket." Clem shuffled out of the room and began to rifle through the chest that stood at the foot of the long couch in the antechamber. She straightened at the unmistakable tinkle of hooks being pulled back on the curtain rod

closing off the hidden hallway. Faster than she'd moved in years, Clem hobbled back into the kitchen. The curtain stood open, leaving a gaping hole into the black corridor beyond. Halfway down the hallway, Jack stood framed in the soft glow of an open doorway.

Clem froze, seeing the look in his eyes. She knew that look. Soft and silent, she got as close to him as she dared, afraid to spook him into running through. "Jack?" she murmured.

He didn't look at her as he said, "I remember."

Clem swallowed, her heart sinking. "You know how you got here?"

The boy nodded, Adam's apple bobbing as his eyes filled with tears. "There was a crevasse. It opened right beneath me and ... and then the cold filled my mouth and everything was dark. I think they tried to get me out ... I remember shouting and then ... silence."

Clem clenched her fists in the blanket she'd brought, trying not to run to him.

He looked at her then, his hand still on the door. His face shone bright with tears in the light from the doorway. "I think I'm dead."

Clem bit her lip and nodded.

"But you're not." It wasn't a question. When they got to this point, they always knew.

"No," she whispered.

"How?"

"How am I alive?" she asked.

"No." Jack waved his free hand around the long corridor and the cozy kitchen behind her. "How do

you live like this? You're all alone with no one to keep you."

She leaned on a locked door to brace herself. It had been so long since she had any use for her memories. "One day," she began, "I followed a friend here, up to the top of a mountain and into this small inn. I was half starved and snow-blind by the time we got here, but I didn't know any other way than to be with him, to stay by his side until the very end. When he went through his door, I couldn't follow. And none of the others opened for me. I've tried every day since."

He bowed his head when she finished. "Have you ever thought that maybe you're here for a reason? Maybe this place needs someone—a keeper."

She nodded, thinking of all the others she'd met here, all come and gone without returning. "None of us really have a choice, do we? We don't get to say what happens."

"No, I guess we don't." His voice was small. "You've been so kind to me. I'd like to know your name, if I could."

She swallowed. "It's Clem."

He smiled and she felt her heart tug with the joy in that small offering.

"Why don't you stay? Just for a little while longer," she tried.

Jack blinked at her and opened his lips to speak before he turned back to the open door, cocking his head as if someone beyond had called his name. He took a step, and then stopped. He turned to meet her

eyes one last time. "I'm glad we met, Clem. Even if it was just for this short time." And then he was gone.

The door had shut by the time Clem reached it. She sighed, wet and throaty, the sting of tears coating her chapped lips. She didn't bother to wipe them away. Pulling herself along, she made it back into the kitchen and shut the curtain behind her. With it closed, she could pretend the doors didn't exist, that her hermit's world was nothing more than these four walls and the whistling wind around the cracks in the window frame.

Clem bent and pulled a large book, bound in linen dyed a vivid red, from the bottom shelf of the corner bookcase and sat down to open it. On the first line of the first page, read the entry,

> *Shae... door nine... last words: 'I'm not afraid because you were here'*

She brushed it softly with a calloused finger, as if the name could feel her caress before cracking the book open to the final entry marked by a faded black ribbon. Below the last name in the column, she wrote in a steady hand with the tears streaming down her cheeks to pool in the blanket on her lap.

> *Jack... door seven... last words: 'I'm glad we met'*

She thought about writing her name there, below his, but decided against it. What would she write, after all? *Hermit* or *Innkeeper* or simply *Clem*. They all seemed like half-lies. But the thought tugged at her.

Who would be here to hear her last words, to write down her number? She couldn't go out unwritten.

Instead, she took the pen out again and flipped to the very first page of the book. On the blank space above the first line, she wrote,

> *Shae's Friend... front door... last words to Shae: 'I'll wait here for you'*

Clem closed the book and pressed it between her palms as if in prayer. No one had come back through the doors, not yet. But that didn't mean it was impossible. She could wait a little longer.

SARAH CONNELL

Sarah Connell is the author of the cozy science fiction trilogy, Project Awakening. A collector of hobbies, her favorite things outside of books include painting, hiking and growing obscure vegetables in her garden. She lives in the Carolinas with her husband and their cat, Lyra. You can see more about her stories at sarah-connell.com.

Q&A with Sarah Connell

The following questions were posed by Michael M. Jones, author of *An Encounter in Spice & Thyme*, and are answered by Sarah Connell about their story *The Hermit, the Inkeeper, and Clem.*

What was the genesis for this story?

> I have a love for survival memoirs—mostly mountaineering. There's something deeply honest within the voices of people who overcame being lost. It isn't easily quantified. I find myself always wondering about those who don't make it back. It feels wrong that their stories are lost to us because they experience everything the survivors do, we just can't hear their voices.

What do you think lies behind the doors? Do you think the visitors go on to an afterlife, or something else entirely?

The other side of each door changes based on the person who stands before it. It's another adventure, calling to the curious. But we can't know for sure what ours looks like until we're the traveler.

Do you think there's any hope for Clem to move on someday?

Clem's journey is timeless. To me, she is always there. But perhaps one day, Shae will be standing on the other side of a door, and we'll find that he has been waiting too.

Would you rather be the Innkeeper or a traveler?

This is a great question! I thought it would take more time to debate my answer. Instead, I immediately thought "Innkeeper." Maybe that's why we write stories—to find ourselves in the protagonist.

Is this a stand-alone, or part of a larger world?

This was written as a stand-alone. But Clem may have a part in another one of my stories coming out next year.

An Encounter in Spice & Thyme

By Michael M. Jones

It had been a long, slow night, with barely any business beyond a few regulars, and Layla was ready to close up early and go grab breakfast. Somewhere out there, a stack of pancakes was definitely calling her name. Before she could follow that thought, however, a potential customer slipped into the space, exhibiting neither the focused intentions of someone who knew what they wanted, nor the idle curiosity of a tourist taking in the Midnight Market's various offerings.

No, the young woman looked around with a mixture of wide-eyed fascination and nervous hesitation, taking in the shelves filled with jars, bags, and boxes filled with spices, sugars, extracts, vinegars—a thousand different baking ingredients from across the world and places that didn't appear on any map. She didn't even notice Layla at first, so intent on inspecting the source of a particularly sweet, spicy smell on a nearby shelf.

"Arcadian cinnamon," Layla said with a soft chuckle. "It's extremely potent, so don't sniff too hard. A little bit goes a long way."

The young woman jerked back in surprise, immediately stuffing her hands in her pockets as if touching the merchandise would commit her to something she didn't understand, despite her obvious curiosity. "Oh! I—"

"It's okay. Smells are free, and samples available if you'd like to try anything." Layla offered a smile. "I'm Layla, owner of Spice & Thyme, and I doubt you're here by accident."

"Melanie," said the young woman, barely into her teens now that Layla had a better look at her. "And no. My grandmother told me how to find the Midnight Market and your stall. She was going to come with me but she's been sick lately ... so I thought maybe I'd come on my own." Melanie glanced to the side, as if distracted by a display of exotic salts. It didn't quite hide the watery gleam in her eyes, or the nervous tremor in her voice.

Layla felt the young woman's concern for her grandmother and frowned sympathetically. "I'm sorry to hear it. Might I assume you and your grandmother are both kitchen witches? That is, after all, the majority of my business."

Melanie looked back, blinking. After a moment, she nodded. "I'm ... in training? I'm just a beginner," she admitted.

"Have you discovered your affinity yet?" asked Layla curiously. Kitchen witches' magic manifested through baking and cooking, but most found they

had an affinity for a specific discipline. She'd known witches with affinities for everything from cookies to cakes, sauces and gravies to soups and stews, even one who specialized in pickling. She found the vast range of manifestations fascinating, often trying to guess a specialty before the witch told her. Melanie wasn't giving off any distinctive vibes—hardly surprising if she was a rank novice.

"I love to bake, but I'm not sure what my affinity is yet," Melanie admitted. "Grandmar got sick before we got that far into testing."

"Grandmar ... short for Margaret?" Layla guessed. At Melanie's nod, she snapped her fingers. "Margaret McGuire? I was wondering why I hadn't seen her this month ... I actually put a few things aside for her, based on her regular purchases. I have some jack o' lantern spice from the Brambles which would make a spectacularly terrifying pie." She smiled. "Kitchen witchery runs strong in your family. I think I've met at least a dozen of your relatives at one point or another. I'm almost surprised it took you this long to show up here. I thought most McGuires started as soon as they could be trusted with a measuring cup or wooden spoon," she said with a laugh.

Melanie ducked her head. "It's a lot to live up to sometimes," she admitted. "I'm something of a late bloomer. I didn't show any signs of magic until a few months ago."

"Well, better late than never. So what brings you in, anyway?" Layla asked. "Is there anything in particular I can help you find?"

"I wanted to make something," Melanie said. She produced a piece of paper from her pocket, unfolding it and offering it over. "To help Grandmar get better."

Layla skimmed the sheet. A list of ingredients carefully written out in meticulous handwriting. "Summer Isle flour, unsalted Helios butter, stardust sugar, Cibolan cocoa powder ... you're trying to bake a Paradise Chocolate Cake!"

Melanie blinked at the mix of astonishment and amusement in Layla's voice. "I ... um ... yes? I got the recipe from Grandmar's journal. She loves chocolate, and this didn't look too tricky ..." she trailed off uncertainly. "Is that bad?" she finally asked.

"Bad? Oh no. Just extraordinarily ambitious for any kitchen witch, especially a fledgling one," Layla said gently. "Without the right affinity, and a whole lot of experience, that's a recipe that'll fail spectacularly almost every time. There's a joke that getting it wrong will *send* you to Paradise ... on a one-way trip. The recipe itself is simple, but the ingredients are pretty volatile if you don't know what you're doing. I can't even tell you the last time I saw a Paradise Chocolate Cake in the wild."

"Oh." Dejected, Melanie took back the recipe and started to turn away. "I—you're right, that's way too advanced for me. Sorry. I didn't mean to waste your time."

Layla winced at the forlorn expression. She knew the feeling all too well. "Hey, don't get discouraged. Just, maybe start with something smaller. I think I have an idea. She'll love it, and even a beginner can

pull this recipe off if they pay attention to details." For the next hour, Layla walked Melanie through a recipe pulled from her own journal, explaining every ingredient and step necessary in making Spice of Life Brownies. "The secret is in the orange zest. I get mine from an Emerald Sea trader." She sent the young witch home with a sack of supplies and a copy of the recipe, refusing payment until the next time. "I want to know how this turns out," she said. "I expect you back next month, hopefully with your grandmother as well."

Melanie left, clearly feeling more confident and excited about trying out the new recipe. Layla watched her go with a smile, trying to remember when she'd been that young and enthusiastic. Before she discovered she didn't have a shred of kitchen witchery in her blood, or anything close to an affinity. Just a journal full of recipes she'd never be able to make herself. Sure, she could follow the recipe, mix the ingredients, do everything perfectly, but without that certain little spark, her brownies were just brownies. Delicious, but mundane.

But if she couldn't be a kitchen witch, at least she could be useful in other ways ...

When Melanie returned a month later, accompanied by her grandmother, she brought Layla a pan of perfectly baked, still warm, Spice of Life Brownies.

MICHAEL M. JONES

Michael M. Jones lives in southwest Virginia with too many books, just enough cats, and a wife who controls the television remote. He's a professional book reviewer for *Publishers Weekly*, the editor of anthologies such as *Scheherazade's Facade* and *Schoolbooks & Sorcery*, and his stories have appeared in venues such as *Hexagon*, *Stupefying Stories Showcase*, and *Dirty Magick*. He has a shiny new Masters in Childrens Literature from Hollins University. For more, visit him at michaelmjones.com.

Q&A with Michael M. Jones

The following questions were posed by Sarah Connell, author of *The Hermit, the Innkeeper, and Clem*, and are answered by Michael M. Jones about their story *An Encounter in Spice & Thyme*.

The setting of your story is captivating—have you written any other stories in this world?

> I've actually written quite a few which share the same general space. The larger setting is the city of Puxhill, a fictional metropolis set somewhere in the midwestern (yet unspecified) United States. Inside that is the Gaslight District, a neighborhood where things get nebulous and weird with disturbing frequency. Finally, the Spice & Thyme stall is part of the Midnight Market, a magical traveling marketplace which I've visited in stories such as "Mirror, Mirror, in the Market," "The Midnight Market," and the forthcoming "The Three Impossible Tasks of

Anastasia Morozova." It's like a nesting doll of fantastical oddities. While this may sound like a lot, each story stands on its own, but it all adds up over time. You can visit michaelmjones.com/bibliography for links and availability.

Did you get your inspiration from your own love of baking?

Oh, absolutely. I love food, fairy tales, and cats, and those themes pop up with great regularity. I'd been toying with the idea of writing about kitchen witches for a while, and this story sprung forth as a result. I love the thought of baking with intent, purpose, and emotion, and it's always fun to invent special magical ingredients and treats. Melanie's family has existed in the back of my head for a while; she's just the first one to really get a starring role. But not the last. Someday maybe we'll meet her cousin, who specializes in pickles ...

If you were a kitchen witch, what would you bake?

Who says I'm not a kitchen witch? No, but seriously ... I'd like to think that my affinity would be cookies. A great many people know me for my cookies—my family, coworkers, the local comic book store, the desk staff at a certain hotel in northern Virginia ... What can I say? I love baking them but I can only eat so many! Of those, I think my specialty would either be chocolate chip, or ginger cookies. Depending on the specific cookie, the secret

ingredient, believe it or not, is either flavor-infused balsamic vinegar, or a good bourbon barrel aged maple syrup ... (See? Magic!)

Dig and the Dragon

By A. Katherine Black

Light from the afternoon sun poured in from the cave entrance to sparkle across the gems buried in the cave wall, and to shimmer against Dig's metal pincer hand. If Motty saw this, they would giggle and dance their little feet in circles. They would ask Dig what it felt like to be its very own shiny gem. But Dig had no mouth to explain that or anything else to Motty. It had been created to find gems high in the mountain caves, a job that required wings and feet, hands and eyes, but did not require a mouth.

It was getting late. Dig had better return soon, and with a bag full of gems. Its snail shell ears couldn't hear anything outside the cave, let alone hear the village on the other side of the far mountain, yet Dig could feel Misuz's voice crackle through the bristles of its broom head. *Or else.* Or else was never good.

One last gem to free, and it would go.

The more gems in Dig's bag when it returned, the quieter Misuz would be. She'd spend all evening at

the table, holding each gem up to the candlelight, inspecting every angle before placing it in the chest. Not paying a bit of mind to Dig or Motty.

Unable to blink its button eyes against the glint of sun against its hand, Dig unfolded one wing and extended it until the light was muted, filtered through the burlap fibers.

Dig worked quickly but gently, pincer tapping against the packed dirt, rope fingers gently wiping away the loosened grains. Bright, jagged edges emerged, bit by bit, from a cocoon of earth. One more coaxing touch from its rope fingers and the gem finally shifted. A shiver of satisfaction trickled through Dig's iron rib cage, as it continued to tap and coax. The gem was almost free, when the cave grew abruptly dark. Dark as a night in Dig's closet.

Dig retracted its wing, which did nothing to release the light. Had the sun decided to retire early today? Dig didn't know if such a thing might happen, but then there were so very many things Dig didn't know. It turned to inspect the mouth of the cave.

A large creature stood on two legs, its thick body blocking Dig's exit. Its face awash in shadow, the creature's angled edges gathered the sunlight from its back, shimmering more brilliantly than a pile of gems lit by a table full of candles.

The fronds of Dig's broom head were empty, yet also thick with curiosity. It stepped toward the creature just as the last gem finally broke free from its prison, to fall with a *rap-tap-tap* to the dirt floor.

Hinged knees bent, Dig walked its hoe feet slowly toward the shadowed and sparkling thing. The bag of

gems fastened to Dig's iron rib cage jingled with every step, sending a cascade of clinks echoing against the slick cave walls. The creature's ears, pointed atop its head, twitched with every clink of the gems, until Dig stopped half a wingspan away. The creature stepped sideways, revealing itself in the light of the late afternoon sun. It was beautiful.

Its body was covered in strange scales, each ridged and dappled with twinkling color. Reds and purples, yellows and blues. A trickle of smoke huffed from its long snout, out and in, out and in. Its eyes shimmered and flowed in captivating, circular rainbows.

It wouldn't be until later that Dig would learn this thing was a dragon, just like the creatures from Motty's stories. Dig would huddle with Motty behind the cottage and use its rope fingers to twist and turn the loose ground until a picture of the dazzling creature emerged. Little Motty would shriek and clap, saying *dragon! dragon! dragon!* until Misuz yelled at them to get back to their chores. But that would be later.

That would be after the creature stretched out its long glistening snout to blow smoke through the fronds of Dig's dry broom head, emptying it of everything, filling it with nothing but the brilliance standing right within its reach. That would be after the creature nudged Dig's bag of gems, causing them to jostle with a sound that pleased Dig and also made it as nervous as when Misuz reached for her rolling pin. The creature stomped a large foot, shaking the cave and sending a jolting that disturbed the strings

suspending Dig's stuffed gloved heart within its iron rib cage.

The dragon opened its jaw and dipped down, grabbed Dig's bag of gems in its teeth and pulled. A tear sounded, and gems tumbled in all their blues and yellows, reds and purples, to rest around Dig's hoe feet. One more huff of smoke in Dig's face, and the dragon stepped to the edge of the cave, shook its wings, and leapt to join the wind.

Dig reached a rope finger into its pouch and out the wide hole at the bottom. Panic crept across its broom head, chasing away the last wisps of smoke. Misuz had put more than a few chips in its rib cage, when Dig returned without enough gems.

Dig scanned the sky, but the creature was gone.

If only Dig could find it, bring *it* back to the village. Something that brilliant, that beautiful, would please Misuz more than any bag of gems. But before Dig could work out a plan to fix this disaster, Misuz sounded the horn.

Dig's snailshell ears couldn't hear the horn from so far away, still it felt the call shake every piece of its being. Misuz would not be happy she had to use the horn.

Despite the call, Dig held its ground, examining the gems in the dwindling light. The longer it resisted the call, the more violently Dig's body shook. Its wings agitated. Its thoughts screamed. It had to return to Misuz.

Dig picked up the largest gem with a shaking pincer hand and wrapped its rope fingers around the pincer for security. The horn's pull loosened ever so

slightly as it moved to the cave opening, and Dig leapt into the evening sky.

Dig stood unsteadily in the village hall, in the exact spot Misuz had instructed. The floors of village buildings were all made from trees, killed and sliced, laid on their sides in rows to dry and crack. People made it look so easy, walking across the bumps and grooves, but Dig's hoe feet slipped and wobbled about. Dig's feet were better suited to soft grasses and cave floors.

To Dig's side was the large blazing fireplace, to its other side the villagers, milling between tables, gathering in clusters to mutter at each other before breaking apart and forming new clusters.

Wobbling again, Dig extended its wings ever so slightly, hoping for a little more balance, but it didn't make a difference. Dig could crouch for stability, bend until its iron ribs rested on hinged knees, but Dig disliked crouching. It did enough of that when ordered to tuck into the closet at night.

A small hand wrapped around one of its ribs. "I got ya, Diggie," Motty said. There were so many things it would say to Motty, if Dig had a mouth.

Motty did all the talking when they sat on opposite sides of the closet door, late at night. Dig would lean the dry fronds of its broom head against the door and soak in Motty's whispered stories. When the words slowed and yawns lengthened, Dig wriggled rope fingers under the doorway to tickle Motty's

toes, signaling the time for bed. Only once did Misuz find Motty sleeping outside the closet door, and Dig would do anything to save them from another punishment like that.

Motty didn't say anything else as they stood together in the hall. Dig agreed, it didn't seem the time for a fanciful story. They watched the villagers, milling and muttering. Dig's snailshell ears weren't good enough to tease any words out from the muddle of voices. Motty's hand tightened around its rib. Maybe they were as afraid as Dig was to be in this hall again.

This was where Dig was made, where the witch gathered things that belonged to the villagers, put them together, and called it a digger. And now Dig was back. As far as it could imagine, the only thing to do after making something was to unmake it. Maybe this day was Dig's last.

The heavy doors creaked open, hushing the villagers at once. The crowd parted as Misuz and the witch walked toward Dig. Misuz's boots, made of skins from creatures long dead, sent a rumble across the floor and up Dig's body to disturb the bristles at the tip of its head.

The witch wore cloth the same color as Dig's own burlap wings. Her footsteps were like clouds, barely there, yet larger than the entire village.

"Don't worry," Motty whispered.

The witch approached, her head in line with the stuffed glove heart suspended within Dig's iron ribs. She tilted her head to look into its eyes. "What's the problem?" Questions and answers chased circles

around the fronds in Dig's broom head. If only the witch could pluck them out. If only Dig could ask her where it could find the dragon, more beautiful, more colorful than a pouch of gems could ever be.

"Thing came back last moon with a torn pouch and hasn't collected but a scant few since," Misuz said. "Doesn't work anymore. We expect a replacement."

"No!" Motty's shriek shuddered Dig's rib cage.

Misuz pointed to a stool. "Sit." Motty shuffled away, fingers holding onto Dig as long as they could.

The witch tapped Dig's rib, spreading a ripple of warmth to the very tips of its wings. She winked before whirling to face Misuz, braids lifting in the air, sending a breeze that rippled the candles on the walls of the hall, two at a time.

"It's searching harder than ever," the witch said. "I promise you that."

"Then where in sky and sea are the gems?"

"It needs better eyes."

Misuz raised her chest and tilted her head, like she did just before reaching for the rolling pin. Dig's rope fingers twitched.

"Sounds like a swindle to me," Misuz said, joined by a chorus of murmurs. "I think *you* could have given it better eyes at the start." Misuz turned to share nods with the villagers, who shuffled forward like a brewing storm. "What'll happen when word spreads that you're selling useless diggers?" Villagers hooted in angry agreement.

The witch chuckled, as if politely listening to a joke that made no sense. "There are limits to what I

can do with what I'm given. Not even the best of us can make gold from dirt."

Shouts rang from the crowd. Fists slammed against tables. The room felt tighter than Misuz's closet. The witch turned to Dig, reaching to brush soft fingers along the bristles on its face. Then she strode over to Misuz.

"A demonstration then," she said. "Do you have the horn?"

"Always." Misuz flicked the long piece of hollow metal attached to her belt, sending a jolt through Dig that nearly toppled it over.

The witch turned to Dig. "Digger, please fly immediately to the nearest mountain cave. Collect the three most brilliant gems, and bring them here."

Misuz stood with a frame that promised something worse than extra closet time, if Dig didn't get this right.

It clanked awkwardly toward the door, almost tripping twice. Whispers wafted from the villagers, their words of doubt catching to swirl in Dig's snail shell ears. It stopped at the door and turned to look for a comforting face.

Motty stood on the stool, on the far side of the angry crowd, nodding vigorously at Dig. It wanted to scoop them up and fly them to the highest cave in the farthest mountain and never come back. It wanted them to meet the dragon Dig had seen only once, that Dig had been searching for ever since that amazing, upsetting day. Misuz pushed Motty off the stool as villagers poked at Dig until it backed out of the hall.

Patience. The witch's voice drifted to rest in Dig's head. Her eyes danced like fire, so bright it could see them from across the hall, so warm it could still feel their gaze after the doors had slammed closed.

Dig did as the witch asked.

It headed for the nearest mountain. Dig felt heavy, flying through the air. Unable to enjoy the sight of an elegant mass of birds, swirling to the South. Not even the smallest urge to dive through a particularly fluffy puff of cloud, hanging just above.

Dig's head weighed with words spoken in the village hall. Being unmade meant never again watching birds, never again darting through clouds. It meant never again seeing a dragon. Never again playing games with Motty.

It felt like a very long trip to the cave. Dig hadn't been there since the early days after it had been made. It had cleared all the gems from this cave long ago, and moved on to caves higher up and farther from the village. But now, as the sun poured into the cave's mouth, its insides sparkled. Gems were everywhere, their colors brilliant. Had the witch filled this cave that had once been empty?

There were so many, how was Dig to choose? It could take the first gems within reach, but would the witch know, would Misuz know if they were not the shiniest, the best in the cave?

This choice meant everything. It meant another night listening to Motty's stories from the other side of the closet door. It meant not being unmade.

Dig stepped carefully among the lovely stones, turning to and fro in search of particularly sparkly

pieces. What made a gem the best? Was it the color? The shine? It walked deep into the cave and back again, more agitated with every step at the seemingly impossible task. How could it know which is the best? If only Motty were there. They might not know the answer, either, but they would pat Dig's rib and say something nice.

Dig stopped right then, broom head fixed in the direction of a gem that was a soft, soothing shade. Blue-green, like a pond just after sunrise. It gathered the gem and dropped it into the pouch attached to its rib. A few more steps and there was another gem.

This one had a look that was familiar, and unsettling. So purple it was nearly black, the gem reminded Dig of the inside of the closet at night. It clinked thick against the other in Dig's pouch. One more, and Dig would be done.

Stepping back toward the mouth of the cave, where the gems sparkled brighter under a generous pour of sunlight, Dig saw a yellow gem, bright and brilliant. Like the witch's eyes, like the sun itself at the height of the day. Dig gathered the third gem and dropped it into the pouch. Relieved and terrified, Dig shook out its wings and stepped toward the cave opening.

A rush of wind knocked Dig backward. Rolling awkwardly onto its side and returning to its feet, Dig peered out of the cave. The dragon drifted through the air, light and easy, its body sparkling brighter than all the gems in all the mountains, and it disappeared into a cloud.

Dig wanted more than anything to chase the dragon, to twirl and circle through the refreshing wet cloud mist, but the witch was waiting. Misuz was waiting. Dig had to return, or face an unmaking. And even if it did return, Dig feared an unmaking still might happen, if it offered the wrong kind of gems.

As if in response, the call came from Misuz's horn. It shook every bit of Dig's body, dousing it with an aching discomfort that would only be relieved when it returned to the village. But Dig stood, watching for the dragon.

The creature shot out of the top of the cloud, pulling a trail of mist up with it, reshaping the cloud until it looked like a majestic mountain reaching to touch the sun. The dragon flew circles around the cloud peak, its body aglow, reflecting sunlight in new directions with every flap of its wings, every swish of its tail. What if, instead of bringing three gems from the cave, Dig brought back three gems *and* a dragon?

Misuz would be busy for days and days examining the dragon, admiring it, leaving Dig and Motty free to play from morning until night. Dig might take Motty on rides into the sky, where they could laugh and dance with the birds. Dig's head swirled with so much possibility, it almost softened the discomfort of Misuz's horn. Dig shook its wings and took to the air.

It climbed the winds toward the cloud's peak, where the dragon still circled in a smooth, graceful glide. As Dig neared, the dragon tilted its head to look its way. The dragon's gaze was like a suction, drawing Dig in further, faster, until the connection

abruptly broke, and the dragon dove down into the cloud.

Dig followed, breaking into the soft cloud mist, unable to see the dragon but heading toward the spot where it would exit the underside of the cloud, and there it was when Dig broke through. The dragon headed toward the treetops, in the direction of the village. This was perfect. Dig had only to encourage the dragon to veer toward the hall, and there was a chance.

Dig narrowed its body into a fast dive. The thrill of the dive made the discomfort of the horn disappear almost entirely. As the treetops quickly grew closer, Dig spread its wings to slow and angled into position next to the dragon, hoping to alter its course with a friendly bump. The discomfort from the horn lessened as they neared the village, as if Dig's entire body was released from an enormous, tight squeeze. Dig was near enough now to the dragon that it could see the creature's eyes blink softly in its direction. Dig felt instantly calmer. Everything was going to be okay.

And then the dragon changed course.

It pulled in its wings and spiraled its body under Dig and out the other side, like a rolling pin pushing in the wrong direction. The dragon dove down to weave between treetops, heading away from the village.

The horn sounded again.

Pain burst from the tips of Dig's limbs toward the center of its iron rib cage. Misuz had never before sounded the horn twice. Dig struggled against the

deepening ache while it shifted direction and dove into the trees, but every flap of its wings away from the village increased the pain until Dig's limbs threatened to seize. It floundered and crashed into a treetop before regaining control. The pain was excruciating. Dig had to turn back. The dragon's sparkle diminished into the forest, heading where Dig had no strength to follow.

Dig returned to the hall, opened the latch with shaky fingers and walked wobbly steps toward Misuz and the witch. The crowd parted with a silence that fed Dig's worry.

It wasn't until Misuz pulled off its pouch and looked inside that Dig learned there were only two gems. Dig dropped to a crouch, flinching at Misuz's every word. When had it lost a gem? When the dragon's breeze had knocked it back into the cave? When it collided with that treetop?

Misuz held the two gems up for all to see. Villagers' voices rumbled and spouted. This would be the end for Dig. It looked to Motty, sitting on the stool. Their fingers lifted in a small wave.

The witch's voice tugged Dig out of the panic about to consume its stuffed glove heart. "As I said, it needs better eyes."

Misuz growled. "How did it see all the other gems, then?"

"It found the obvious ones. It picked gems from the cave surface until there were no more. Now all that's left are gems buried deep in the floor, within the walls."

Dig wondered why the witch was saying this. Not only were there were plenty of gems still to be found in plain sight, but Dig had always been able to see gems trapped deep in under the dirt. That wasn't the problem. The problem was that Dig had found something better than gems. Something brighter than everything Dig had ever found before.

"What do you suggest, then?"

"Buttons are no longer enough," the witch said. "It needs gems. With eyes of gem, it will easily find more gems."

The villagers' roared protests. Arms waved. Candles flickered on the walls. "We need every gem we can to support this village." "We already spent most of them." "What if the digger flies off with our gems on its lousy broom head?" Dig would've rather been outside in an actual storm than in that hall.

Misuz raised her hands. The crowd silenced. Dig wondered if she'd raised the rolling pin to them as well. "And if we agree, witch?"

"There is payment required, as usual."

Misuz held her palms up to the witch, open and empty. "You would take more of the very gems we ask you to help us find, the very gems we need to survive? Sounds like a swindle indeed."

"If gems or metals are not available, I will accept labor."

Whispers rippled through the crowd and died as Misuz scanned the villagers. Several people shoved children behind their backs. "We can find your labor."

The witch held her hand out to Misuz, who placed the two gems just retrieved from Dig's pouch, one blue-green, one yellow. The witch stepped to Dig. Raising her palms up, each with a gem, her mouth moved.

Sound came from the witch's lips, but Dig couldn't understand what she said. Her words felt like rain falling on Dig's dry broom fronds, soaking in until its head felt too heavy to hold. Her hands reached up, up, up, her arms longer than they had just been, until her palms cupped the gems against each of Dig's button eyes. In she pushed.

The witch's hands pressed so deep into Dig's head, it was almost like she was scooping the gems out of a cave all over again. Her hands sank into Dig's broom face, but it didn't hurt. It was soothing. Enveloping. When the witch finally removed her hands, the room sparkled in astonishing color, filled with dents and interesting angles.

Dig shuddered as it surveyed the hall. Each villager glowed a different shade, no two alike. Motty, sweet Motty, sparkled in a glorious rainbow shine, and Misuz shown a dim, dull gray. The witch looked exactly like she had before, with her simple robe and blazing eyes. "Now the digger will find what it's looking for," she said.

Dig's gloved heart shivered.

"We will see," Misuz said. "Labor in exchange was the agreement. You can take that one."

She pointed at Motty.

Dig was still adjusting to its new gemstone eyes, but the darkness inside Misuz's closet looked almost the same as it had through Dig's old button eyes. It was the light coming from under the closet door that was different. No longer dim and hazy, the light now spilled and flowed, shimmering like a waterfall Dig had once glimpsed along the far side of a distant mountain.

Misuz's snores rattled through her bedroom door, across the kitchen, and through the closet door to grate against Dig's snailshell ears. The snores were worse tonight, because now there was nothing to look forward to when they began. No patter of little feet from Motty's bed at the edge of the kitchen to the other side of Dig's closet door. No hands wriggling under the door to play tapping games with Dig's rope fingers. No stories about things real and things pretend, whispered through the sliver of space between the door and the wall.

It was just Dig now, alone in the darkness, no way to hurry the moon through its rise and fall, no way to stop the aching thoughts that snagged in the stiff bristles of its heavy broom head.

Motty would be far away by now, traveling on a road somewhere with the witch, headed to wherever the witch went when she was not in this village. Dig's wings ached to push away from the closet, from the cottage, to spread wide under the moonlight and drift

on silent winds in search of Motty. Dig's stuffed glove heart felt tight, as if it could no longer contain what was inside.

For the first time in its life, Dig uncurled its rope fingers and reached inward. Reached until its fingers gently touched its own heart. It was a strange feeling. Soothing, but also nearly unbearable.

Dig pressed gently against the glove, probing, trying to locate the source of the pain. But the pain seemed to be coming from deeper inside. Dig's heart wasn't broken. It was simply too full. In the same way it would loosen a gem stuck too tight within a cave wall, Dig began to pick tenderly at the stitches around the opening of the glove.

It had used those same rope fingers just as carefully on the day it was made, on the first night Misuz ordered it into the closet. Used them to greet Motty for the very first time.

Dig woke that first day in the village hall to see the witch standing on a stool, so close her breath trickled through the fronds in its head. Her hair spun in swirling, silvery braids, and her eyes dazzled. The wrinkles on her face shifted softly when she spoke. Her voice soaked into Dig's metal ribs and shimmied down to the tips of its hinged hoe legs.

"You will do what your missus says," she said. "You will fly in the day to caves near the mountain tops. You will fill your bag," she patted the cloth sack strapped to one side of Dig's iron ribs, "with as many gems as you can find and bring it back to your missus before sunset." The wrinkles folded around her eyes. "You will be a very good digger." The witch

stepped down from the stool and walked out of the village hall.

Dig was left with Misuz, whose face stretched tight from ear to ear. She led Dig to her cottage. Its new metal feet teetered against the hard floor of the village hall, but Dig was able to move more quickly though pebbles and grasses outside. It followed as fast as it could, stretching its burlap wings as it went, testing them out with a wriggle here and a shake there.

The air teased at Dig's wings, urged it to take to the sky. But then they reached the cottage, and it was straight to the closet from there.

Dig did its best to fold and tuck. Did its best not to jostle the shelf with many jars, some with grains and some with squashy things that drifted in liquid. It was on that night That Dig heard Motty's feet for the first time, pattering from their bed, across the kitchen, to settle outside the closet door.

Dig didn't know then what a Motty was. Back then Dig knew so very, very little. It knew little more than what the witch had said in the hall and what compulsions had come with the discarded parts that made up Dig's awkward body. The rope fingers wanted to reach and twist, reach and twist. The iron cage torso wanted to protect and contain, the hoe feet wanted to work and work and work and work, and the broom head had begun from the start to gather and collect, gather and collect.

Dig had not yet imagined things like rainbows and wishes, and it definitely had no idea that dragons danced among the clouds on wings like Dig's. And it

would never have learned anything if Motty hadn't sat on the other side of the closet that night and every night since, telling all there was to know and more.

Motty had stuck their little fingers under the closet door and wriggled them around, darting from side to side, then pulling them back before Dig could decide how to respond. There was nothing in the witch's instructions about wriggling fingers, and not even a bit of knowledge about small hands under doors had been etched into the items used to make Dig. When the fingers resumed their jiggling under the door, Dig did the only thing it could think of. It extended its rope fingers under the door and jiggled them right back. Motty giggled.

"You're so lucky you have wings," they said. "People don't have wings."

That was the first time in its life that Dig wanted to say something. It would be far from the last. If it could have, it would have asked Motty why didn't the witch give people wings, like she gave Dig wings. But Dig had no mouth, so instead it continued to wriggle its rope fingers under the door, and it let Motty tap at them as much as they wanted.

"Know what else has wings?"

Dig did not.

Dig knew of nothing besides itself and the witch, besides Misuz and Motty. And that's when Motty told Dig what else there was. There was so much, so very much else.

They began by listing things with wings. There were tiny little insects with bunches of wings that

lived all over the place, "a thousand in this very village alone," Motty said. There were birds of all sizes, from teeny weeny ones to eye-poppingly huge ones. And then there were the very grand and very old dragons, with wings as wide as a cottage.

"Dragons like gems, too," Motty'd said. "Some people say the gems even *come* from dragons, but I don't know. Maybe that's just pretend."

After the many, many days it had lived, Dig still couldn't always tell what was pretend and what was real. And now there was no more Motty to help sort it all out.

Dig's broom head slumped against the closet door, and Dig was confused at the effort required to lift its head up again. Its new gemstone eyes took in the shimmer on the floor of the closet, which now gathered and tufted in strange, puffy ways. The light from under the door spilled across a spread of fluff Dig had been picking out of its glove heart. Dig probed its heart with rope fingers now weak and floppy, to find the glove nearly empty. And yet it still hurt. It hurt even more than before.

If Dig's heart went all empty, did that mean it would no longer live? And if Dig no longer lived, did that mean it could never again see Motty?

Dig's rope fingers dropped to the floor and began the clumsy job of gathering the stuffing. But Dig was so weak, and nothing moved the way it was supposed to. It pulled out its pincer hand, which fell to the floor with a thud. Misuz's snores sputtered to a stop, and Dig froze, which was also difficult to do in this strange, hazy state. Once the snores resumed, Dig

slipped its fingers around the stuffing, gathered it into the pincer hand, and raised it toward its rib cage. That was when Dig got a good look at the stuffing, with its new gemstone eyes.

The stuffing was grey and dark, like dust from a corner long forgotten. Dig recalled seeing the villagers earlier that day, after the witch gave it the new gemstone eyes. So many colors, so brilliant a spectacle. But then there was Misuz, who shone of nothing but a dull gray, just like the stuffing Dig held in its pincer now. Who had given this glove to the witch, to be suspended within Dig's ribcage? It must have been Misuz's glove. Dig's heart had been filled with Misuz's stuffing.

Dig dropped the wad and reached unsteady fingers back to its gloved heart to pull out more stuffing, and more. The more it pulled out, the weaker it became, until Dig could barely control its own fingers. This was not the time for Dig to unmake itself. It needed more stuffing.

New stuffing.

Dig did something then that it had never even thought to do before. And really it didn't think about it this time, either, as thoughts were now too floppy and slippery to catch. Dig snaked its fingers under the door and up, up, up toward the latch. Its fingers dipped and fell, tilted and teetered, but eventually they reached the latch. Dig had the sense to wait for a loud snore from Misuz before pushing at the latch and leaning as hard as it could against the door. Nothing moved. Dig tried again, rope fingers slipping this way and that, Dig's thoughts nearly

floating away like just another cloud in a lazy blue sky, until the latch finally moved. Thankfully Dig remembered what to do next. It pressed, and the door swung wide.

A sparkle of moonlight drifted through a window, lighting a path across the kitchen. Every movement was a struggle. Dig scraped its body along the floor, trying to move with Misuz's snores, freezing when the snores stopped, sliding again when they resumed. Dig's body felt numb, its head thick. But it finally came to rest in the kitchen nook where Motty's bed was tucked.

Dig set its pincer hand to work, tearing into the pillow where Motty had rested their head for so many dreams. Out came the pillow's stuffing, shining like a rainbow in the dim cottage kitchen, warming every corner of Dig with its glow.

Dig set its rope fingers to fluff and ball, fluff and ball, and stuff Motty's colorful dreams deep into the fingers of Dig's aching glove heart. The stuffing was warm. Pressing it into the empty spaces of Dig's heart was almost unbearable, and absolutely wonderful.

Sunlight peeked through the cottage window when Dig was finished. It stood with ease as ideas gathered and connected within the fronds of its broom head. Walking its metal feet quietly as it could across the hard cottage floor, Dig stepped to the window. Morning colors erupted in the sky, then faded and shifted, as the sun steadily rose to take its place.

"The hell are you doing, digger?"

Dig turned to find Misuz standing in the bedroom doorway, face tight, head tilted in that way that meant the rolling pin. Oddly, Dig didn't shiver at the sight.

"Back to the closet. Now."

It walked to the closet and reached in with rope and pincer hands to grab a jar from the shelf.

"What the hell are you—"

It threw the jar on the floor. Misuz jumped back as the glass shattered. Grains piled on the floor of dead trees. Dig bent and began moving the grains with its rope fingers, the vision suspended within the fronds of its head, within the very stuffing of its heart, clearer than anything it had ever seen, even through gemstone eyes.

Dig finished its work and pointed a pincer hand, as it looked to Misuz. She gripped the frame of the doorway as she took in the picture Dig had drawn in the grains. Motty's face. Motty's eyes. Motty's smile.

Misuz's face shifted then, through expressions unfamiliar to Dig. "That's what you want?" She stepped forward and kneeled then wiped away the picture with one swoop. "Ha!" Her smile was nothing like Motty's. "Your little friend is gone." She stood and narrowed her eyes. "You know that's your fault, right?" Her laugh was empty.

"The day is here," she said, turning and stepping to the kitchen as if nothing had changed. "Might as well start your work. Go find my gems, Digger."

My gems. But they weren't Misuz's gems. They weren't the villager's gems.

Dig walked into Misuz's bedroom–"Where the hell are you—"–and crouched, reaching a pincer under the bed to grab the handle of the gem chest and slide it out from under the bed.

Misuz feet stomped toward the kitchen, and Dig heard the familiar sound of the cupboard opening. Dig stood, the chest hanging from its pincer hand, when she returned with the rolling pin. "Put that back."

Dig wondered again at the lack of shiver in its joints at the sight of the rolling pin. What once had been a terrible sight was now just a simple tool, in the hands of a dull, empty person.

"Time to send for the witch, Digger. You're done."

For the first time, Dig sincerely agreed with Misuz.

Stretching its pincer arm out as far as it would go, Dig held the chest of gems ahead of itself as it walked right toward Misuz. She seemed to realize she couldn't reach around the chest and do Dig any harm, even with the rolling pin, and she jumped to the side. Dig walked past Misuz and paused at the door, turning to soak in the sight of the cottage one last time. The closet where Dig had spent all its nights was now open. Broken glass spread across the hard floor now glittered in the sunlight.

"Did you forget about this, Digger?"

Misuz held the horn in her hand. She tapped it with the other hand, and Dig felt nothing. Nothing but contentment. It turned and reached its rope

fingers to the door of the cottage as Misuz blew the horn. It sounded thin, like a sad, hollow memory.

Dig stepped onto the dewy grass, shook out its wings, and took to the sky.

Excited as Dig felt, riding the air without fear of the horn, without a need to ever return to the village, the flying was still difficult while carrying a chest heavy with gems. Dig felt the weight with every pump of its wings, trying to pull it from the sky, to crash among the trees. It took twice as long to get there, but Dig arrived in the same far cave, on that same far mountain, where it first met the dragon.

It dropped the chest to the cave floor. A floor that sparkled with new gems, gems that had not been there the last time Dig had visited this cave in search of the dragon. Dig had returned every day since their first meeting, until the witch had been summoned and had given Dig its new gemstone eyes.

Dig saw with its new eyes a trail of gems leading deeper into the cave. It followed. A few turns and the sunlight was gone, yet Dig was surprised at how much it could still see. At how it could see the dragon curled into a nook carved in the cave wall. Even in darkness, the dragon shimmered. Its body moved with soft breaths, up and down, up and down. Dig knew what it had to do.

Returning as quietly as it could to the mouth of the cave, its body all jittery and jumpy, Dig grasped the handle of the chest with its pincer hand, then turned and jumped at the sight of the dragon standing only a wingspan away. It rested on its haunches, wings half opened, eyes blinking slowly,

like some creatures did when returning from their dreams. It seemed to be waiting.

Dig dropped the chest between them. It reached its rope fingers into the lock at the edge of the lid and fiddled at the latch inside, until a click sounded. Dig lifted the lid and tilted the chest, spilling the gems onto the cave floor.

They sparkled brighter than ever, sparkled like the dragon itself. Maybe it was Dig's new gemstone eyes, but now it all seemed so clear. The gems were pieces of the dragon, shed from its body, the way a four-legged creature in the village would shed its fur, the way a bird would shed a feather. The gems came from the dragon, and they *belonged to* the dragon.

The dragon bent its snout to the pile of gems on the cave floor and breathed a smoky breath, causing the colors to shift like a thousand dancing rainbows. The dragon raised its head and looked to Dig.

This was not yet done.

Dig reached its pincer hand and rope fingers to grasp its own gemstone eyes. Shivers jostled Dig's iron ribs, but its heart was full and sure. Dig pulled the eyes from its head as gently as it used to pull a gem from the wall of a cave. As its eyes broke free, the world went dark. Dig reached out and released the gems, clinks sounding as they joined the others at the feet of the dragon.

Dig would never see Motty again, would never see the sunrise or a flock of birds, but it didn't matter. Dig knew all these things, knew so very many things, whether it had eyes to see them or not. It knew Motty's joy and humor and imagination. It knew the

multitude of creatures who flew through the skies, knew the cool feel of the clouds and the shifting wrinkles on the witch's kind face.

Dig relaxed on its haunches, content. Motty would be proud of what it had done.

A huff sounded close to Dig's face. Warm air flooded the fronds of Dig's broom head. It was the dragon's smoky breath. Another wave of warmth, and a thought weaved through Dig's mind. Everything was going to be okay.

Something touched Dig's face where its eyes had been. There was a pressure, deep and firm, reassuring. And then Dig saw the dragon's claws. Dig saw the dragon. Dig saw the pile of gems on the cave floor.

Reaching rope fingers to inspect its new eyes, Dig traced their shape, felt their ridges, and Dig's heart overflowed with wonder. It stretched fingers out to the dragon, who huffed a smokey breath and blinked slowly. Dig traced the shape of its scales, felt the ridges across each one. The dragon had given Dig its scales.

The dragon stretched a wing tip toward the pile of gems on the floor, the pile that included the gems Dig had pulled from its broom head, and with its wing the dragon brushed them all aside. It reached down with clawed fingers and began to move the dirt, to draw a shape in the cave floor. It was a picture of Motty.

How did the dragon know Motty? The dragon huffed a puff of smoke, and Dig was filled with calm.

The dragon gestured to the cave floor and Dig looked again at the picture of Motty. It began to

move. Motty was dancing circles on the grass, hands raised to the air. Motty was giggling. Motty was—

Dig knew where Motty was.

Could see with its new eyes a distant place, past two mountains, tucked in a valley, just to the side of a lovely waterfall. Dig could see the dragon sitting before it in that cave, could see the picture of Motty moving through the dirt of the cave floor, but Dig could also, *at the same time*, see the *real* Motty, playing in front of a cottage. It could see a flock of birds gliding through the air on the other side of the mountain, could see small furry creatures packing nuts into the nook of a tree at the bottom of that mountain. Dig could see more than what was in front of it. Much, much more.

The dragon dipped its head and huffed a smoky breath into the iron cage that held Dig's heart. Dig felt a warmth and a joy it hadn't before imagined. Dig and the dragon would meet again. Dig could see that now.

It reached down with roped fingers to move the dirt between them. Shifting the lines, it changed the picture to a cloud, soft and peaked, with a dragon flying gracefully around its tip. The picture moved, and the dragon soared, as Dig's own heart soared.

It didn't take long for Dig to reach the witch's home. She sat on a rocking chair just outside the door, humming a tune while her hands weaved long pieces of grass together, each bend and turn a small step toward something new.

Motty twirled and danced in the grass, and when Dig landed just a wingspan away, they shrieked and

ran to grab its ribs and tell it in a spill of excitement everything about the witch's home, Motty's new home. Dig's new home.

A. KATHERINE BLACK

A. Katherine Black lives in Minnesota with her family, their cats, and her overworked coffee machines. She loves making snow angels and dreaming up stories about creatures with bunches of legs, tentacles, and wings. Find her at flywithpigs.com or on bluesky @akatherineblack.bsky.social.

The Lady of Shallot

By Alfred, Lord Tennyson

This poem is in the public domain and exists in two major revisions. The author published one in 1832, and revised it for publication in 1842. We have opted to include the version from 1842, largely out of personal preference. We encourage you to look into the older version if you enjoy this one, as it has significant differences.

I

On either side the river lie
Long fields of barley and of rye,
That clothe the wold and meet the sky;
And thro' the field the road runs by
    To many-tower'd Camelot:
And up and down the people go,
Gazing where the lilies blow
Round an island there below,
    The island of Shalott.

Willows whiten, aspens quiver,
Little breezes dusk and shiver
Thro' the wave that runs for ever
By the island in the river
    Flowing down to Camelot.
Four gray walls, and four gray towers,
Overlook a space of flowers,
And the silent isle imbowers
    The Lady of Shalott.

By the margin, willow-veil'd,
Slide the heavy barges trail'd
By slow horses; and unhail'd
The shallop flitteth silken-sail'd
    Skimming down to Camelot:
But who hath seen her wave her hand?
Or at the casement seen her stand?
Or is she known in all the land,
    The Lady of Shalott?

Only reapers, reaping early
In among the bearded barley,
Hear a song that echoes cheerly
From the river winding clearly,
    Down to tower'd Camelot:
And by the moon the reaper weary,
Piling sheaves in uplands airy,
Listening, whispers "'Tis the fairy
    Lady of Shalott."

II

There she weaves by night and day
A magic web with colours gay.
She has heard a whisper say,
A curse is on her if she stay
    To look down to Camelot.
She knows not what the curse may be,
And so she weaveth steadily,
And little other care hath she,
    The Lady of Shalott.

And moving thro' a mirror clear
That hangs before her all the year,
Shadows of the world appear.
There she sees the highway near
    Winding down to Camelot:
There the river eddy whirls,
And there the surly village-churls,
And the red cloaks of market girls,
    Pass onward from Shalott.

Sometimes a troop of damsels glad,
An abbot on an ambling pad,
Sometimes a curly shepherd-lad,
Or long-hair'd page in crimson clad,
    Goes by to tower'd Camelot;
And sometimes thro' the mirror blue
The knights come riding two and two:
She hath no loyal knight and true,
    The Lady of Shalott.

But in her web she still delights
To weave the mirror's magic sights,
For often thro' the silent nights
A funeral, with plumes and lights
    And music, went to Camelot:
Or when the moon was overhead,
Came two young lovers lately wed;
"I am half sick of shadows," said
    The Lady of Shalott.

III

A bow-shot from her bower-eaves,
He rode between the barley-sheaves,
The sun came dazzling thro' the leaves,
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
    Of bold Sir Lancelot.
A red-cross knight for ever kneel'd
To a lady in his shield,
That sparkled on the yellow field,
    Beside remote Shalott.

The gemmy bridle glitter'd free,
Like to some branch of stars we see
Hung in the golden Galaxy.
The bridle bells rang merrily
    As he rode down to Camelot:
And from his blazon'd baldric slung
A mighty silver bugle hung,
And as he rode his armour rung,
    Beside remote Shalott.

All in the blue unclouded weather
Thick-jewell'd shone the saddle-leather,
The helmet and the helmet-feather
Burn'd like one burning flame together,
    As he rode down to Camelot.
As often thro' the purple night,
Below the starry clusters bright,
Some bearded meteor, trailing light,
    Moves over still Shalott.

His broad clear brow in sunlight glow'd;
On burnish'd hooves his war-horse trode;
From underneath his helmet flow'd
His coal-black curls as on he rode,
    As he rode down to Camelot.
From the bank and from the river
He flash'd into the crystal mirror,
"Tirra lirra," by the river
    Sang Sir Lancelot.

She left the web, she left the loom,
She made three paces thro' the room,
She saw the water-lily bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
    She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
"The curse is come upon me," cried
    The Lady of Shalott.

IV

In the stormy east-wind straining,
The pale yellow woods were waning,
The broad stream in his banks complaining,
Heavily the low sky raining
    Over tower'd Camelot;
Down she came and found a boat
Beneath a willow left afloat,
And round about the prow she wrote
    The Lady of
Shalott.

And down the river's dim expanse—
Like some bold seër in a trance
Seeing all his own mischance—
With a glassy countenance
    Did she look to Camelot.
And at the closing of the day
She loosed the chain, and down she lay;
The broad stream bore her far away,
    The Lady of Shalott.

Lying, robed in snowy white
That loosely flew to left and right—
The leaves upon her falling light—
Thro' the noises of the night
    She floated down to Camelot:
And as the boat-head wound along
The willowy hills and fields among,
They heard her singing her last song,
    The Lady of Shalott.

Heard a carol, mournful, holy,
Chanted loudly, chanted lowly,
Till her blood was frozen slowly,
And her eyes were darken'd wholly,
    Turn'd to tower'd Camelot;
For ere she reach'd upon the tide
The first house by the water-side,
Singing in her song she died,
    The Lady of Shalott.

Under tower and balcony,
By garden-wall and gallery,
A gleaming shape she floated by,
A corse between the houses high,
    Silent into Camelot.
Out upon the wharfs they came,
Knight and burgher, lord and dame,
And round the prow they read her name,
    The Lady of
Shalott.

Who is this? and what is here?
And in the lighted palace near
Died the sound of royal cheer;
And they crossed themselves for fear,
    All the knights at Camelot:
But Lancelot mused a little space;
He said, "She has a lovely face;
God in his mercy lend her grace,
    The Lady of Shalott."

Colophon

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